





Audens Stewart .
1898 .

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A SON OF THE PLAINS



A SON OF THE PLAINS

BY

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OF THE NEZ PERCÉS," ETC.

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A SON OF THE PLAINS.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TRAIL.

A BROWN line of sandy track six hundred miles long, and fifteen to fifty yards broad, beaten out of the prairie by the hoofs of countless oxen, sheep, and horses, and the feet of men,—such is that great emigrants' thoroughfare from East to West known as the Santa Fé trail.

The source of the trail is at Van Buren City, Arkansas; it ends at Santa Fé, the capital of New Mexico, and so vast has been the traffic over it that even the tough prairie grass has yielded up its life, and not a blade is left upon the track for fully four hundred miles.

A grim record has the Santa Fé trail. All kinds of men pass over it, but it knows the emigrant best,—

and many, very many, have never gone further. Thirst killed them, one by one, as they wearily tramped on and on, expecting the summer rains, which were late that year; or they died, a score at a time, round their blazing wagons, massacred in a night by the Arapahoe Indians.

Nowadays, the journey is comparatively safe; but the observant traveller finds many a memento of the good old times, and when turning over the bones of cattle, horses and sheep by the wayside, will stumble not unfrequently upon the skull of a man.

Twenty years ago, before the trail's deadliest foe, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fé Railway, began to cut it to pieces and extinguish part of it altogether, a man who embarked on a journey across the plains carried his life in his hands. Yet there were men who did it constantly. Stockmen these, bred in the country beyond the trail, whose business it was to bring their produce to the Eastern markets, and who counted such risks as it had to offer them the merest child's play. Every summer, in the months of June and July, when rain may be expected,—though it does not always come,—men with wild-eyed sheep, gaunt long-horned cattle, or wiry broncho ponies, wended their way by easy stages from the mountains and the plains of New

Mexico and Colorado to the towns of Kansas, sometimes as far as Kansas City itself, marking by day the water-holes and creeks, at night watching by their lonely camp-fires for the prowling Indian. The Indians, to do them justice, seldom interfered wantonly with such travellers, finding them more trouble than their possessions were worth.

In the summer of 1873, a camp of two thousand sheep, four horses, a dog, and a wagon, all in the charge of two men, leisurely wended its way in an easterly direction, bound for Seckersburg, a town in Eastern Kansas. The sheep were "Mexican," but well-graded with Merino blood, and while retaining the physical strength and hardiness of their original ancestry, had gained a crop of thick, long-stapled, silky wool, which would give them a good market value anywhere. Moreover, they were in excellent condition, in which respect they were in striking contrast to the rest of the live-stock, including their owner and his man.

Food on a sheep-ranche is of the simplest description. In winter every one eats mutton. Bread is used sparingly and as a luxury; molasses (coarse treacle) is occasionally indulged in. For drink, there is coffee, innocent of milk or sugar. In summer,

owing to the absence of refrigerators, fresh meat is impossible, and the sheep-man retires upon dried or salted bacon. To this beans are added, and the two together form the whole of the diet available on a sheep-ranche while the warm weather lasts. In summer, therefore, sheep-men are the thinnest of any known race on earth.

The men in charge of these sheep on the trail were in their usual summer condition. Their dog, whose share of the food was the bread crusts and bacon rinds, was thinner still; while the horses, though independent of meat, were worked so hard, by reason of the sandy nature of the track, that to an inexperienced eye they would have appeared mere living skeletons. Those who knew the Western pony, however, would have pronounced them to be in good working trim.

The camp, when we become acquainted with it, was beginning its first preparations for settling down for the night, on the Two Butte Creek, a small water-course twenty miles west of the Kansas frontier. It was a good camping-ground. The creek, with the aid of a shower the day before, had deserved its name by providing at this point three large holes of water, or, to speak more correctly, liquid of the colour and consistency of thick pea-soup, which when boiled in the

coffee-pot produced a certain quantity of water. A strip of fresh, succulent grass bordered the creek for nearly half a mile, the trail crossing a hundred yards below and bearing away slantwise to the northeast, ascending a "roll" or undulation of prairie, on the side of which the camp was pitched. In a few minutes the fire was lighted, the horses picketed out for the night, and cooking-utensils (*i.e.* two tin plates and cups, a frying-pan, battered coffee-pot and mill, and pan of black Mexican beans) were produced from the wagon, and in less time than any civilised person would consider possible, the camp-master stood up and whistled a signal to his companion that supper was ready.

This man meanwhile, the herder, had gently set the two thousand faces of his sheep camp-wards, and, leaving them to their own devices, made a wide detour to the left, approached his supper—that best and most grateful of meals—with long eager strides.

It was a peaceful scene, growing more so as, the sun having set, the night gathered fast from the east and the evening stillness crept over all living things. There was no wind, and the sky was free of cloud. To the west the lurid light in the wake

of the sun made the brown prairie, stretching like the sea without a bush to relieve its monotony, browner still, and cast a faint reflection of orange on the white backs of the sheep, as they greedily cropped the fresh grass, and approached by slow degrees their bedding place on the hill. The most restful moment this in all the herder's day. Sheep, properly handled, have an unfailing instinct of what to do with themselves when night is near. The light of the fire they know means protection, and as long as it is on the slope of a hill—for sheep hate flat ground to sleep on—they draw toward it of their own accord, and as the last gleams of daylight die away settle contentedly down in one great mass of baaing drowsiness.

Very soon there was no sound in camp but the occasional stamp of the tired horses and their busy munching of the meadow grass. The sheep were asleep, the dog was dozing, and the men, their supper done, smoked in silence before the dying embers of the fire.

They had not spoken a word since the meal began, and but for a few curt remarks about the route to-morrow they would not address one another, probably, for twenty-four hours more. Yet they

were not stupid, nor sulky, nor sad, nor oppressed with uneasy consciences. They were simply men who had been bred in the great silent land of the far West, where speech becomes a very minor quantity in life. How can we bring home such a condition to our readers, dwellers in cities and towns, whose fathers dwelt in cities and towns, and to whose experience the customs, thoughts, and actions of such men as we have before us to-night are stranger, and more puzzling, than those of the wildest beasts of forest or field?

Sheep-rearing had been the business of these men for years; and sheep-camp in the summer where a man lives for months together miles from the settlement in a hut of his own making, and sheep-ranche in winter where he is by himself every day for twelve hours out of the twenty-four, is the loneliest life in the world. And when this goes on from year's end to year's end — one unchanging round of monotonous work, no society to enliven it, no holiday to break it — what happens?

In the examples we have here, two things have happened. We will take the herder first. He is a tall, powerfully built man of fifty-five, who in spite of his elastic step and a wiry frame, looks ten years

more than that. Drink has laid a heavy hand upon him. Just now he is free from his enemy, for he has not seen a saloon for two months, but in the trembling hands, bleary eyes, and bloated features, the demon has left indelible claw-marks, and when the long tramp is over will claim Sebastian Bean body and soul while he has a cent in his pocket. Five years ago Bean was as sober a man as need be, but he lost his wife that year, and before twelve months were gone every stick he possessed had been sold over his head, and he was a wanderer without a friend.

The other man, camp-master and owner of the two thousand sheep, is a very different person. At first sight he looks little more than a boy, for he is of slender build, and has not a hair on his face. Take a second glance into that face, and you feel he may be any age up to forty. As a matter of fact, he is just twenty-two, but so hardly have the circumstances of his life dealt with him, that no Eastern man would believe he was less than five and thirty.

There is no sign of drink, however, here. His features are regular and sharply cut, his complexion a clear brown, albeit so burnt and deeply tanned by exposure that one would be half inclined to wonder whether he

were of white blood but for his light blue eyes. He is the picture of health, and gaunt though he be, unlike most sheep-men he holds himself well, carrying his head with a certain dignity which makes him appear taller than he is. Yet he looks haggard and worn. His cheeks are as hollow as though he were recovering from illness, his lips, untouched as yet by the merest suggestion of a moustache, are thin and tightly drawn. Western life has left its mark on him. There has been no pleasure in his life since he can remember. He has worked hard and successfully, for these sheep are all his own, but there has been some shadow across his path which has robbed him of his youth. If we look closely into his face, we see something more than weariness caused by a monotonous life. In his eyes there is that listening, watchful expression, to be found in the eyes of savages, or of men who have had to live for years in the midst of constant danger, yet the cast of his features is curiously immobile, and seldom expresses the least emotion or interest in anything living or dead.

Nat Worsley began life on his own account at eleven years old. His mother died when he was six, and for five years afterwards he was the companion of his father — a sheep-man of some wealth. This was in the

old frontier days before the Civil War, about which life people nowadays know little. Frontiersmen are always silent and uncommunicative folk, and so hard was the life and rough the fare then, that travellers in search of information went elsewhere to find it. In Nat's eleventh year the Comanches came down, and far and wide rose the smoke of burning homesteads and the shrieks of tortured men. One day Worsley's ranche was attacked, and after a sharp struggle—the boy behaving under fire like a veteran of ten campaigns—the place was taken, and within twenty-four hours Nat became the adopted son of the chief by whose hand his father died.

Five years passed. The boy lived, even thrived, under the training of his foster-father, who loved him and taught him everything he knew. All this time Nat never saw a white face nor heard a word of English spoken. But he never forgot the night his father died; and as he grew older the determination to make his escape grew also. At sixteen he contrived to realise his ambition, and falling into the hands of Texan horse-breeders, worked his way back to the place of his birth in Southern New Mexico, picking up his own language, which he had forgotten, on the way. Here he took service

as herder with one John Denayer, who had known his father, and worked so well that in five years more his master took him into partnership. A year later Denayer died, leaving Nat part of his property.

All this time the boy had been gradually emerging from the half-savage condition to which his training in the Indian camp had reduced him. John Denayer taught him to read and write, and Mrs. Denayer, a native of St. Louis, told him a great deal about town life and the world in the East beyond the plains, and lent him books, which he had eagerly devoured. The outcome of all this was that when Mrs. Denayer, after her husband's death, returned to her relations in the East, Nat decided to follow her; see something of the world that men had made, and complete his education. So, in the good old-fashioned way, he had packed his worldly possessions into a wagon, and hiring one man to help him, set his face eastward and started upon the long journey over the Santa Fé trail.

His plans were to sell his stock when he could find a good market for them, and then hasten on by train to visit Mrs. Denayer in St. Louis.

He was now more than half-way across. Another

month, and Seckersburg, where he hoped to sell the sheep, would be reached. Most young men under such circumstances would have been eager and hopeful. Not so Nat. So deeply had the weariness of his many hardships and long years of toil entered into his being, that he had no mental buoyancy left to hope for anything. He dreaded, with the shrinking of a wild creature, the plunge into a new world, and only took this plunge because he felt instinctively that without a break in this unnatural life of loneliness and monotony he would go mad, or, like the man beside him, take to drink.

The fire burnt lower and lower, the pipes were done, it was time to turn in. The campers rose together without speaking, and laid their blankets on the grass. They did not go to sleep at once. Bean had a blistered foot to attend to, and Nat, with the mechanical action of one who is performing a daily task, knocked out, examined, and reinserted, the cartridges of a revolver and repeating rifle, which were never out of his reach day or night. He had just completed this when he heard a strange sound, and without moving a muscle of face or body sat listening. Bean dropped the foot he was examining and looked up. He did not attempt to listen himself.

After a minute Nat took his rifle and pistol and laid them across the blankets at his feet, drawing his knees up to his chin and clasping them with his hands.

"I wonder," he said musingly, as if speaking to himself, "who this will be?"

"What?"

"The horseman on the trail from the east. There's only one. I guess his horse is tired, by the steady way his foot-taps strike. Can't you hear it now?"

Bean shrugged his shoulders. His worst enemy could not accuse him of dulness of hearing, but this was beyond his power. He drew on his boots again, however, and stood up.

"Ah! now I dew catch it. He ain't goin' so fast neither. Yet he's lopin'. Tell us what it means."

"A man who has ridden far. We must stop him. Come with me, and keep to the right of the track. Lie down when you get there. We will bead him together, but don't let go unless my shot fails. Keep your aim well on the horse. A man doesn't lope over the trail alone at night for nothing."

This was the last word spoken. With quick steps the men vanished out of range of the firelight,

and not a sound betrayed their whereabouts until on the brow of the hill, faintly outlined against the starlit sky, there came the figure of a man on horse, riding hard.

“Pull in, — Halt!”

The words rang out like a pistol shot, and made the horses near the wagon jump, while the dog, left to guard the camp, gave a deep growl of sympathy. As for the person to whom they were addressed, he was so much astonished that he nearly fell off his horse in reining him in.

“Get down!”

The traveller hesitated, and settled himself in the saddle.

“Who are ye?”

“Get *down!*”

An emphasis was placed on the last word which served its purpose well. The horseman instinctively ducked his head as if to avoid a threatened bullet and slid from his saddle.

“Well — here I am,” he drawled, — “and there’s nothing to me, or on me, or in me — for I’m hungrier than three bears.”

“Come to our camp then, and we’ll fill you up with a square meal.”

The man gave a prodigious sigh of relief.

“That’s good news. My head’s nigh turned silly with hunger, and I’m choked with thirst. Let me eat a sup, and then you shall hear all I know. And I *have* news, yes—My Lord!”

He said the last words to himself in a lower tone, and, the camp being reached, he slipped the saddle off his horse, begged some corn for him, and then threw himself by the fire as if tired out.

In a few minutes he was devouring beans and bacon in a way that did credit to his teeth and appetite. Nat and Bean watched him and speculated.

He was a cowboy—that was quite evident. His broad felt hat with its whip-cord band, a shirt gaudily embroidered with beads, leather riding-overalls, high-heeled boots, in which no one could walk a mile without danger of being lamed for life, and spurs with rowels three inches in diameter.—proved that. But his carriage and bearing were far from expressing the easy assurance generally characteristic of men of his profession. His hands, they noticed, were shaking as if he were recovering from a debauch; his face was a dull yellow, and he shuddered at intervals as if he were suffering from ague. But according to Western etiquette no questions might

be asked until he had eaten and drunk his fill. When he had emptied his fourth cup of coffee, Nat handed him a corn-cob pipe and a light.

“If you’re through—we’re ready.”

The man nodded, and eagerly seized the pipe, his fingers shaking so much that he dropped the burning wood upon his clothes and nearly set himself on fire. He laughed at this, a feeble, forced sort of chuckle.

“I’ll be doggoned, friends, if ever I were like this before. I’m just scared right through, ’tain’t to be denied. My nerve—why, I have no nerve, now. No more’n a tenderfoot bucked on his head for the first time. I’m clean turned, as you may say. But then I’ve seen— How can I tell ye? See here now. One hour before sundown twenty-six boys, myself among ’em, camped in a creek fifteen miles east of here, and ’bout half a mile off the trail. We was travelling partly to convoy some fine stock; and part to escort two gells—daughters of old man Shelford, sheep-man, Albuquerque way—to New Mexico. This was an hour before sundown, three, or maybe four, hour ago. Now—” he paused, and then went on in a hoarse whisper:—

“It was a pretty camp. Good water, and cotton-

wood—quite a lot of timber. The gells was that pleased they began walkin' down the creek, tired of ridin' so long. We boys went to the tail wagon, where there were a whiskey bar'l kept, to take a nip 'fore settlin' in for the night. We were all dry, for the day had been dusty and hot, and so, somehow, we took *two* nips—or some of us did—and we were all hangin' around anyhow—when on a sudden there came a woman's shriek; another, louder, and two more smothered-like, and then the boss, who was on the other side of the wagon and could see further than any, yelled out:—

“‘It's a raid—Arapahoes! Fight, ye devils, fight. If those gells are lost, and one of you lives, I'll plug him myself.’

“It was his last word—poor old Jeph! A bullet whizzed from the timber, and he fell all of a heap. Then we started, every boy of us—madder than hares. But not one had any sense after the whiskey, and we went for 'em bald-headed in the open. And the Arapahoes, who'd planted themselves in that timber, cunning as death, had the easiest time you can think of. We fought—aye—and all lie there dead, scalped. All but me and the gells. I happened on my pony, and when I saw it were no good,

I lit out, and here I am, and — that's the end, captain."

The man stopped abruptly and covered his face with his hands, twitching all over.

No one spoke for nearly a minute. Seb Bean's teeth were clenched, and he was breathing heavily. Nat, without any change of countenance, was looking at the cowboy.

"You did not bring the women along?" he said at last.

The man started as if he had been bitten.

"Women? The devils attacked us for them and our horses. The gells, I told ye, were snapped up first pop. I were only *one*."

There was another silence, broken at length by Seb Bean, who was unable to contain his feelings any longer, and let fly a volley of hard oaths, whether at the Indians or at the cowboy for his desertion, or at both, was not quite clear. The stranger turned pale.

"You can call me what you like, boss. But 'tain't fair. What could you, or any one, ha' done?"

He made the appeal to Nat. But Nat seemed to hear nothing. He was staring into the fire.

"They weren't Comanches?" he said at last.

"No — no, Arapahoes."

“What sized crowd?”

“A hundred — mebbe less; but enough on the surprise.”

Nat nodded, and fell into his reverie until a hand grasped his knee.

“Nat, boy,” growled Bean’s voice, trembling and husky, “you’ve been with Injuns, and you *know*. Can’t you see any way we might pick them girls out? I’d go anywhere and chance all for the littlest bit of a show at it if you could tell me how to start.”

Nat laid his hand on the old man’s and held it fast.

“Wait, I’m thinking.”

Another silence — a long one this time. Then Nat raised his eyes slowly and looked at the cowboy again.

“I lived five years in Comanche camp, friend, and I have an idea. It is not for you, Seb,” pressing his hand; “I must work it out, and this man must show me the way.”

“What!” shrieked the cowboy, springing up; “go back to them demons, whose yells are ringing in my ears this minute? No! I say *no*. You ain’t seen what I have. That old man, he knows nothing. If those gells were my own sisters, I would not stir a step. — Hello! what — hold up — I can’t breathe.”

He had been caught by the throat and thrown down, his neck gripped so tightly that he dared not struggle for fear of being choked outright.

"Save your breath and listen to me," said Nat, in a tone that trembled a little now. "I have not hurt you and don't wish to. But be careful, for the life of a coward is worth nothing in this country. I don't know the location of those Arapahoes, and you *do*. I want nothing more from you. Will you refuse? You won't if you have the heart of a cat. Get up and tell us, but no more raving foolishness; I can't stand that."

The cowboy's throat was freed, and he rose to his feet as he was bid, slowly. He still felt the grip of Nat's fingers, and before he spoke rubbed his neck vigorously and groaned. Then he looked long and earnestly at the men. There was no resentment in his face.

"Are you re'elly going?" he said at last.

"Yes."

"Ah, we-el — I — I'll be with ye. Now that's truth."

He laughed the careless cowboy's laugh, and held out his hand. Nat took it, and looked at the man keenly.

“What does this mean — are you fooling?”

“Foolin’!” He laughed again. “Look here, boss, I ain’t so terrible wise, but I know enough to play a straight game with *you*, and I stand to my word, if I can’t always stand fire. I mean business! I’m glad to go there. After all, you’re ’bout right. A coward is worse trash than skunks. See now, I’ll swear,” he said, becoming enthusiastic, “to hold to ye in this, and you may plug me through if I fail.”

Nat set his teeth.

“Swear, then — with me — repeat every word, and Seb, you be witness to his oath.”

They were all on their feet now, and the fire, revived by a kick from the old herder, blazed up for a moment, shining brightly on the earnest faces.

“I swear,” said Nat, “that I will go back upon this trail to save these women, so help me God.”

The cowboy repeated the words in a loud voice. He was a different person now. His eyes were steady; he stood firmly on his feet, the shivering had gone.

There was a moment of deep silence after the oath had been taken, and then Seb Bean, placing a hand on the shoulder of each of the men, added an oath of his own.

“And I swear to you, Nat Worsley, that if this man breaks faith, and deserts you in your time of need, though he go to the end of the world I will find him out and kill him, *so help me God.*”

CHAPTER II.

ARAPAHOE CAMP.

A COUNCIL of Indian warriors twenty years ago was often an impressive sight. In peace time, when the chiefs assembled in their robes of state—albeit only blankets and feathers and furs—and the ceremony was conducted according to rules of the strictest etiquette and decorum, these councils of savages might be set as examples which the parliaments and congresses of civilisation would do well to study with diligence and respect. In war time, before battle, the sight was grander still in spite of the grotesqueness of the war-paint. But after battle—especially after a victory—everything was changed, and in the place of judicial deliberations of grave men, there was a jabbering crowd of wildly exulting bravos, each man so busy boasting of his own deeds and prowess that the few chiefs anxious to get business done had a hard and thankless task.

The Arapahoes, this night, were no exception to the rule. Twenty-five white men had they killed ; and for booty they could count forty good horses, an extensive camp outfit of provisions and whiskey, and, best of all, two white women.

So the gallant redskins made merry. They ate the meat, the bacon, and the bread, and every scrap of food cooked and raw that they could find ; then they drank the whiskey, then they set the wagons on fire and danced until they were nearly mad, and lastly they thronged to the council fire and squatted there to decide in full conclave assembled upon the fate of the captive women.

A tall chief, grey-haired, and yet still upright and full of vigour, rose first to address them. This was Long-tailed Dog, principal war-chief of the nation. He made a long speech which was listened to in respectful silence—a strong proof of his influence, and of the self-control possessed by Indians even when they are drunk, for Long-tailed Dog was not a man of few words.

The last sentences of his harangue were as follows:—

“I have now spoken all my words. Shall the women be made squaws of the nation ? Shall they

be kept until good money is paid for them by the whites, or will the young men draw lots to-night — ”

He got no further. Such a fierce and unanimous hum of assent to the last proposition rose on every side that Long-tailed Dog, with the wisdom drawn from experience, sat down there and then without finishing his sentence.

Up leapt one of the younger chiefs, and with a few impassioned words carried his audience away. Fierce yells came from every side. The men started to their feet, and so great became the clamour that even Long-tailed Dog tried in vain to make himself heard. The braves were beyond all authority now. Two threw down their arms to drag the captives to the front. A regiment of troops could not have saved them. But at this moment above the shrieks and yells there came a long-drawn and peculiar cry, and every Indian started as if he had been shot. None were so drunk as not to be able to recognise that sound. Not one was so brave as not to feel a cold chill of dread and foreboding. Again came the cry, this time close at hand, and a stranger, thrusting unceremoniously aside some braves who were in his way, strode into the centre of the coun-

cil, and stood there looking about him with the haughty bearing of a master.

The clamour had ceased. For a moment the captives were forgotten, and a profound silence fell upon the furious crowd.

There was nothing miraculous in this. For the cry had been the war-whoop of the Comanches—more dreaded by the Arapahoes than armies of white men—and the man who stood in their midst wore the dress of a Comanche chief.

“Peace, Arapahoes,” said the stranger, speaking with an intonation which proclaimed his race more certainly to the quick ears about him than his long head-dress of eagle’s feathers had done to their eyes. “I am alone.”

A change passed over the faces of his listeners. There was a reaction in their feelings, and some even cocked their rifles insolently and presented them with a coarse threat at the Comanche’s head.

At this, he became a different being. With marvellous quickness he seized the weapon of the nearest man, wrested it from his grasp, and bringing down the rifle-butt with great force upon his head, felled him to the ground. Then he threw the rifle away, and folding his arms, looked scornfully

at the faces which now crowded threateningly around him.

“Arapahoe dogs! Is this your greeting to a friend. Beware, pigs! Though Young Wolf is alone, yet if his head is but singed by the heat of your fires, every hair that he loses will be paid for by an Arapahoe life. Take care!”

He laughed as he spoke, and the faces of the younger braves about him became contorted with fury. But the chiefs were of a very different way of thinking. Led by Long-tailed Dog they surrounded the stranger; courteously gave him welcome to the camp, and inquired affectionately after the health of his friends.

Young Wolf dropped his sneering tone at once.

“Long-tailed Dog speaks as a father. I have come in peace. Listen, my Arapahoe brothers, for I have a message from Spotted Snake, the great father of my nation, who with five hundred braves”—these words he spoke with great distinctness and deliberation—“lies twenty miles to the north, on the Small Fork River. He sends me to you with great news.”

Young Wolf paused here; and every Indian in the council became as still as a mouse.

"But," he continued, "before I speak you the words I have brought with me, I would tell the joy I feel at your great deeds to-night. You have many white scalps and horses, besides other things. This is good news for me to bear to my nation. I will now give the words of Spotted Snake."

He paused again. No one spoke or stirred, but the speaker's practised eye could read uneasiness in every face as he recounted their spoils.

"The White men have come to offer us promises of land, and many good things if we will give them peace on this trail. We think this is good, but we give no answer to the Whites until the Arapahoe nation has spoken. Those are the words of Spotted Snake. And this morning as the sun rose, your White Bear and Little Owl rode into our camp, and wait now for Long-tailed Dog to join them. That is my news. But, Arapahoes, I have yet words to speak of my own. Listen."

His tone had changed. He spoke again as one of a dominant race.

"You have taken from the Whites two of their women. Do no harm to them. My nation wish for peace with White men. If these women are hurt, not a chief of your nation will live five days."

He looked round him defiantly, expecting a yell of dissent. But there was no sound. The young men kept a sullen silence, and the chiefs looked askance at one another. At length Long-tailed Dog stepped forward and advised compliance with the request of "our good brother."—No one responded, but no one disputed his words, and when he made a sign that the council was broken up, the men separated into small groups and slowly moved off to their respective camp-fires.

Long-tailed Dog now entered into a long conversation with the Comanche. By the time it was over it was nearly midnight, and the old chief proposed that they should go to rest. The wily Long-tailed Dog had placed his blankets near the women in case of accidents, but wily as he was, he was not aware how careful Young Wolf had been to ascertain this fact before he consented to sleep with him.

The place where the Arapahoes had camped was two miles south of the trail, on the banks of a river, where a struggling plantation of dwarf cottonwood and locust trees gave them shelter and cover. On a broad meadow to the eastward the horses were feeding, while beyond them, forming a cordon

round the whole camp, was a line of scouts to prevent any danger of surprise.

Long-tailed Dog led the way at a brisk pace, the Comanche keeping a yard or two behind, apparently out of respect, in reality to examine unobserved the main features of the camp. When the old chief turned to speak, however, his companion was looking stolidly before him.

"See, friend, here are the paleface girls. You will not wonder, now, that my young men were warm in their words. These white women are as fair as the morning sun."

The old man looked very keenly under his brows at the Comanche while he spoke, as if half suspecting that he had private ambitions of his own in this direction.

He was reassured, however, by the absolute indifference of manner with which the stranger looked upon the prisoners. After one careless glance Young Wolf yawned and turned his back upon the women, and asked where he might rest.

Meanwhile the movements of the chiefs were watched with painful eagerness by the captives. No harm had come to them as yet, and they were too ignorant of Indian ways to feel more than a vague

formless dread of what might happen in course of time. But when two Indians came so near, and, after a rude stare, rolled themselves in blankets a few yards away, it was a different thing altogether. For a time the men conversed in whispers, then one, — the fiercer-looking and younger of the two — drew a flask or bottle of some kind from his pocket, from which flask the other took a long and eager pull. Immediately afterwards both men lay down and seemed to sleep soundly.

The girls were far too apprehensive to follow their example. Now and then they talked in whispers of the future, and how, if the Indians demanded a ransom, they could communicate with their father. But whether they talked to one another, or sat in silence, — the camp-fires growing dimmer as the minutes passed and the sounds of excited braves dying away into heavy slumber after their debauch, — they never took their eyes off the Indians sleeping at their feet.

Two hours passed, and the camp was still. Even the girls began to get drowsy, and in a few minutes might have slept; when all at once one of the figures by the fire moved, and the girls clung to one another in speechless terror. The younger of the

two Indians had risen from his bed and was crawling towards them, now on his hands and knees, now close to the ground like a snake. He came foot by foot, so slowly that the suspense was maddening. But the girls sat still, white and breathless, too terrified to scream. One had hidden her face on the breast of her sister, unable to bear the sight; the other, with lips firmly set, never removed her eyes from the creeping form of the man.

He was close to them now, and raising himself until he rested on one knee, he looked round the camp. All was dark, except for the faint glow here and there of a dying fire. Slowly he turned to the girls again, until his face was but a few inches from the one who still kept her presence of mind.

"I am a white man," he whispered. "Hush! keep still. This dress is a disguise. Follow me, and I will get you away. Will you? Speak softly."

He saw her eyes brighten and her lips quiver. She drew a long trembling breath, and whispered back, —

"Who are you?" She was evidently incredulous about his white blood.

"Nat Worsley, sheep-man, New Mexico. A cowboy brought news of you. He is waiting with horses."

A change came into her face. "We will come gladly. But my sister has fainted."

This was awkward.

"Bring her to while I see if the way is clear. Tell her — tell her that if she had nerves like yours there would be no danger at all."

He crept away into the darkness and vanished.

The recovery of the insensible girl was soon accomplished, and at the word "rescue" she became all animation.

But when many minutes passed, — to the girls it seemed like hours, — and he did not come again, the one who had fainted lost faith.

"Maizie, you must have been dreaming. I don't believe I really fainted at all."

"Hush, dear; we must not talk. I hope no harm has happened to him. Oh, look! there he is!"

With slow, measured movements a figure closely wrapped in a blanket glided up to the nearest camp-fire and warmed its hands. It stood there motionless nearly a minute, and the girls saw that by a movement of its feet, it was scattering the embers of the fire and covering them over with earth. In a very short time the spot was in complete darkness, and Maizie felt his breath in her face.

“Are you ready? Don’t speak; just stand up and hold out your hands.”

The girls obeyed, and as they felt the clasp of strong fingers, a feeling of confidence and hope warmed their hearts. Nat, however, gave them little time for reflection. He thrust the end of a rolled blanket into Maizie’s hand and whispered, “Pass this to your sister. She must hold it tightly while you take the middle and I lead. If you are scared or wish to stop, give the blanket a jerk, and I shall know what it means. But don’t speak or cry out — not the faintest whisper. Now!”

He began to walk on very slowly, the girls following and holding the blanket as drowning men clutch at a rope. As they proceeded the pace grew brisker. Sometimes they wound in and out of trees which their clothes brushed against; at others they passed over thick grass, by camp-fires, near which lay dark figures buried in sleep. But they never paused an instant until the breeze which blows at night over the open prairie cooled their heated faces.

Here Nat stopped, and touched their hands reassuringly.

“Our first danger is over. We are out of the camp. But the scouts have to be passed. Rest

here while I prospect again. I will spread the blanket for you — so; now lie down and pull it over your faces. Don't move until you hear my voice again. If a scout sees you, he will take you to be two warriors sleeping out."

His voice ceased, and the girls were alone once more.

CHAPTER III.

RESCUED.

THE girls lay still as they were bidden for fifteen minutes, wrapped up in the blanket. But human endurance has limits, and on this hot night it was so much like premature burial that at the end of the quarter of an hour, Bel, the younger of the sisters, despite a remonstrance from her companion, extricated her head for a moment and took a long breath of fresh air. To her horror she saw a pair of shining eyes within a few inches of her face, and something cold and clammy touched her forehead. This was more than the excitable girl could bear, and she threw aside the blanket with a suppressed scream. Whereupon a furry body fawned upon her with reassuring whines. It was a dog. At the same moment Nat came up at a run. The dog sprang to meet him with a whine of joy.

“Down, Shep!” the girls heard him say in a deep

whisper which made the animal cower at his feet; “you have done for us, boy.” Then to the girls as calmly as though nothing had happened, —

“Get up, please, and give me the blanket. They will have heard you, and we must run as long as you have any breath. The horses are near. Shep, follow and guard.”

The girls obeyed with feverish haste, and set off at their utmost speed, holding Nat’s hands so as not to be separated in the darkness, the dog trotting behind, snuffing the air uneasily as he ran. This violent exertion, however, soon began to tell upon the girls, tired and overwrought as they were, and before long, Maizie, the weaker of the two, stumbled, caught her foot in a prairie-dog hole, and fell on her face. Nat said nothing, but picked her up and, carrying her in his arms as if she were a baby, ran on, faster than before. A few minutes later and Bel’s breath failed her.

“I cannot run any more,” she panted out, with a sob. “Oh, what shall I do?”

Nat pulled up.

“Stay here, and I will come back for you. Shep — lie down!”

He was gone, and Bel was left with the dog. For

a moment she felt the relief of the rest, but the next horrible fears seized her of being pounced upon by the Indians and carried away alone to unknown tortures, and she had to press her teeth together and clench her hands with all her might to keep back an almost irresistible inclination to cry out.

Her only comfort was Shep. She made a movement to caress him—then shrank back in dismay. The animal was quivering all over, and even in the darkness she could see his teeth gleam white. As she touched him he dashed forward with a low growl, and she heard the grunt of an Indian, the fall of a heavy body, and the worrying snarl of a dog when he bites to the bone. The girl, nearly beside herself, sprang to her feet and was about to run wildly away, when a figure glided up, a familiar voice said, “Keep still,” and she knew that her protector had returned. She dropped on her knees and listened. Again came the soft thud of something heavy falling on the grass, followed this time by a ghastly rattling sound, and then a silence that was worst of all. The outline of an Indian’s head-dress now towered above her, a hand was laid on her shoulder, and she shrieked aloud.

“It is me,” said the voice again, and Bel felt herself lifted from the ground, and knew that her

rescuer was running at headlong speed downhill. A few more breathless minutes and she heard Maizie's voice, and knew that she was safe. But, now, only a few hundred yards away there came a loud, shrill cry — the call of the Arapahoe scout, followed almost instantaneously by a chorus of yells, as the whole encampment awoke to a man.

Nat spoke to Maizie. "Can you both ride?"

"Oh yes — anything!"

No more words were needed. In a twinkling the girls were lifted upon the ponies which the cowboy had been holding, and the next minute all were speeding away for the east at a swift gallop, Nat leading the way. This wild race lasted an hour, and then Nat pulled in, and all stood still, panting, while he listened.

"It is all right," he said quietly, swinging himself again into the saddle; "we may now go easily."

Two hours afterwards they reached the camp, and were received by Seb Bean with a shout of welcome.

The dawn was breaking, and for the first time they could see one another distinctly. A sudden shyness fell upon them all. Nat, without speaking, placed his guests by the fire, and set the cowboy to pre-

paring breakfast, then bolted into the wagon to strip off his disguise. Little had he dreamed when he picked it up six months before, to take as a curiosity to St. Louis, what purpose it would serve so soon.

When he reappeared, he had donned a suit of grey buckskin — the best clothes he had — a cotton shirt instead of a grey flannel one, and a new hat with a stiff brim.

No one was more astonished at such a change than the old herder. The girls, who had made friends with Seb at once, and were helping, in spite of all he could do or say, to cook the breakfast, were so much amused at the blank expression of his face, that they surprised Nat by their brightness. He had expected to find them cowering disconsolately over the fire, and had perplexed himself greatly as he dressed to think of some way in which he could lessen their anxiety and awaken enough confidence in himself to make a scheme he had thought of acceptable to them.

And now — lo, they greeted him with smiles, and so far from cowering over the fire had aided Seb so well that breakfast was ready and waiting. But Nat's surprise at the cheerfulness of his guests was nothing to Seb's astonishment at Nat. If he were puzzled at the change Nat had made in his outward

appearance, he was absolutely "dumfounded" at what happened afterwards.

It had always been a grief to him, when he began to grow fond of Nat, to notice the taciturnity of the lad and the almost Indian immobility of his face and manner. He had remarked that strangers who met him were unfavourably impressed, and had wondered what would become of him in the East, where such ways were more foreign and unacceptable than in the silent West.

After to-day he troubled himself on that score no more.

For Nat *talked*. All through breakfast, which lasted three times as long as such a meal had ever lasted before, he never stopped talking except to listen to the observations of his visitors. He apologised for the rough fare he had to offer them, and for the lack of spoons and forks. He talked about New Mexico, and found that he had tramped through the county where their father lived, and had heard his name. He did not touch once upon past dangers or future contingencies. His object was to make them feel at ease; for after the first greeting he detected a strained, anxious expression on the face of the elder girl, and noticed that the laughter of

the younger was on the verge of becoming hysterical.

It is an instinct with some men to know what to do under such circumstances. If Nat had been asked afterwards to repeat what he had said, he could not have done it to save his life. But he accomplished his purpose, and by the time that Seb, with an awkward duck of his head, and mumbled excuse, strode off at a seven-leagued-boot pace to bring his sheep up to the trail, the girls, though still pale and tired, were much more tranquil, and they talked to Nat as freely as if they had known him all their lives.

Nat had given whispered instructions to Seb in a pause of the conversation, and it only remained now to sound his guests. He did this in a few blunt words, his fluency of speech suddenly deserting him. But he had won their confidence, and might use what words he pleased. In the space of ten minutes everything was arranged. The cowboy was to start immediately for the west, bearing letters from the girls to their father, telling him of what had happened, and that they would travel to Seckersburg under Nat's escort, making their journey back to New Mexico by coach. It was a choice of evils.

The Arapahoes, searching far and wide for their lost captives, might very probably keep a watch upon the trail and stop the wagon that day. At the same time the girls were not strong enough to endure hard riding westward, nor were they at all willing to undertake it under the cowboy's protection, while even if it had been possible for Nat to turn back with his sheep, so slowly does a flock travel, and so fast do Indians ride, that there would be even less safety in that course than to push eastwards.

By the time the sun had risen an hour, the cowboy had departed west with outward regret and inward joy; the sheep, under Seb's care, were half a mile on the trail travelling briskly, while Nat, having made his ladies as comfortable as he could in the wagon among the stores, had broken up his camp and was also well upon the way.

All conversation had died a natural death. The younger Miss Shelford almost immediately fell asleep, while the elder, seating herself, for reasons of her own, so that she could watch the driver's face, was pondering upon the adventures of the preceding twenty-four hours, and possible dangers in the future.

Maizie Shelford was a reserved and thoughtful girl. Careless observers, impressed with Bel's soft

brown eyes, tall, well-developed figure, and constant animation of spirits, scarcely saw her quiet sister, and would hardly believe that she was the elder by two years. Those accustomed to look below the surface, however, remarked that while Maizie's stature was insignificant compared to Bel's, her face less expressive as a rule, and her manner undemonstrative, yet her large eyes looked with a keen directness into all things; though she seldom spoke, the words she said were always to the point; and that when she smiled, her face held a beauty of its own in spite of irregularity of feature.

But there were not many people who saw these things; for the sisters were seldom apart, and in Bel's presence it was Maizie's custom to say as little as possible, from a feeling keen even to morbidness that she was dull and uninteresting and must be second, always, to her brilliant young sister. It must be added in justice to Bel that she never intended this to be so. There was perfect love and understanding between them, and to make any slighting allusion to Maizie in Bel's hearing would be a blunder that no man or woman would ever commit twice. But people formed their opinions nevertheless, and the feeling of the girls' friends when they

decided to leave St. Louis, where they had been brought up since childhood, to take care of their father in New Mexico, was nearly unanimous. Maizie ought to go,—it was her duty, for poor Mr. Shelford was alone,—but for Bel to throw herself away in that horrid wild country was something almost sinful. It was a social catastrophe.

In the stress of that terrible night in the Arapahoe camp the position of the sisters had been reversed, and Nat would have laughed if any one had suggested that Bel was the elder sister. The circumstances of his life had made him more observant than most young men of the little things that make up character, and he smiled as he urged on his horses, to see this pale little woman keenly watching him, while her sister slept like a tired child.

Nat was right. Maizie, though very grateful for his services, and confident that the only course was to place herself and Bel under his protection, was yet very much alive to the fact that his character and future intentions were entirely unknown to her; and Maizie was one of those people who do not easily trust a stranger.

Therefore she refused to allow herself to go to sleep, though she sorely wanted to do so; and sit-

ting stiffly on a sack of green coffee-berries, her back supported by a large keg in which Nat kept a store of drinking water in case of need, she took mental note of the face before her.

It was hard, almost forbidding, now that it was in repose. The lips were habitually pressed together, and the corners of the mouth drawn down, giving a certain sardonic expression, as if in his opinion the world were a poor sort of place and the people in it mostly fools.

Maizie remembered seeing much the same look in the face of the friend of her father's who was killed by the Arapahoes. It might be the characteristic expression of Western men. If so, she thought, she did not care for Western men. His nose was slightly hooked, and, with the brightness of his eyes, gave him a peculiarly alert look. Maizie liked this; and when he smiled, she liked the expression of his eyes, but the moment he became grave again they were cold, watchful, and repellent.

Just now they were especially watchful, and from speculations upon Nat's character Maizie began to speculate upon his thoughts, and with a little internal shiver recollected that at any moment they might be met by Indians, furious at the escape of their

prisoners, and eager to gain compensation by violence upon the next white man they saw. The nearness of danger gave a new turn to her reflections, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling Maizie remembered that by assuming the responsibility of their escort, this man she had been so sharply judging had incurred a most fearful risk. Yet he had not allowed the slightest indication of this fact to appear. On the contrary, he had said it was a great favour on their part to consent to come with him.

The day wore on. It was nearly noon and very hot. Bel still slept, and even Maizie found herself beginning to nod drowsily. Nat alone was wide awake. His hard training and present anxiety were sure safeguards against sleepiness, and not a prairie dog scuttling to and fro on business, nor an inch of the horizon line to the north and west, escaped his eyes.

The time came at length when Nat, seeing what he had been expecting to see, laid his hands on the reins and pulled up. Maizie roused herself with a start, and saw him standing on the footboard, shading his eyes with his hands. Nat's face was as quiet as usual when he turned toward her, but she noticed

that the lines about his mouth had hardened and deepened. He looked as if he had suddenly grown older.

"Is it — Indians?" she whispered, speaking under her breath so as not to awaken Bel.

"A scout is lying on the hill."

"What can we do?"

In spite of her courage and confidence Maizie was as white as a sheet. Nat's voice became as tender as a woman's.

"There is no danger yet. Hide yourself and your sister under these felts and blankets, so that they'll find nothing but stores if they peep in. Remember the risk is not so great as in their camp. Cheer up! we shall pull through."

"But they will take everything as they did yesterday."

"I think not. My outfit is not worth enough to tempt them as long as they do not see you. Quick, here they come. Ah, they have split up into searching parties, for there are only twenty here. That is right — the sack of flour at her feet looks well; and the water barrel hides her head. Leave it to me, now, and lie down. I'll lay the sheepskins across you. That makes it natural. Hand me my shot-

gun—take care of the triggers, she's loaded, both barrels. Will your sister wake? that is the point. If there's a chance of it you had better rouse her first. I leave it to your judgment."

While he was speaking, Nat deftly turned and twisted the coverings in the wagon, until every trace of the girls' presence was concealed. He was about to return to his place when Maizie raised her head, and whispered, —

"You must give me a knife; they shall never take us alive again."

Nat started, and took from his pocket a tiny five-chambered pistol.

"Use this if I drop, but not while I'm alive. I will not leave the wagon, and if there's no hope you will hear me say 'fire.' Then—let go, just below the heart. It is double-action—take care."

Maizie took the pistol and their hands met. A deep flush mounted to Nat's forehead, and for a moment he looked at her with moist eyes. Maizie looked back at him trustingly like a child. "I will be very careful," she said softly, and smiled. That smile will abide with Nat and haunt his dreams to his dying day.

All was over in an instant; and Nat swung back

to his seat and Maizie disappeared under her blanket. The Indians were there.

To Maizie, though she had many things to suffer in after days, nothing, in point of sheer horror and sickening suspense, was ever worse than the time that followed. She was able to hear distinctly all that went on, and, buried under ill-smelling sheepskins and heavy blankets, suffered agonies of acute helpless suspense. First came the soft tread of the galloping unshod Indian ponies; the jar of the wagon as Nat, who had resumed his journey, pulled up his excited, snorting team. Then they were surrounded and the crisis had come. There was a deep silence, and Maizie's heart beat so heavily that she was afraid it would wake Bel. It was a relief when she heard one of the Indians address Nat in Spanish. Maizie's childhood had been passed among Mexicans, and she remembered enough Spanish to understand what followed.

"Are you sheep-man?" she heard the Indian say.

"Yes, and alone."

"Your wagon very big for one."

"I come a long way, and carry much food."

"Open wagon, and let me see your food."

Maizie's heart nearly stopped beating altogether.

“What is that for?”

“We have lost something, and look in all wagons on the road to-day. Open, quick!”

“Very well,” rejoined Nat in a very slow, deliberate tone. “You may look, and welcome. But see here, amigo,” his voice deepened now, and Maizie distinctly heard the click of the dog-heads as he cocked his shot-gun, “I have no stolen goods in my outfit, and I am not going to have my things thrown about, not for all the Arapahoes alive. So, look in as much as you like—but keep your hands to yourselves.”

The only reply the Indian made was a grunt, and then the wagon creaked and shook beneath his weight. At this precise moment Bel began to breathe less regularly as if she were on the point of awakening. Maizie’s suffering, now, cannot be described. She knew that the Indian’s sharp eyes were searching every nook and cranny, and that the slightest movement would be utter ruin. She kept trying to remember where she had put her hat. The sight of that would be enough to betray everything, for she had worn it when taken prisoner the day before. The air grew hotter, the sheepskins more stifling, and Maizie felt as if her brain were

turning. A fear oppressed her now that she would move herself—Bel was sleeping still. Suddenly everything grew dark. She heard afar off the sound of voices, there was a rushing in her ears, and then—a blank. Human nature could bear no more, and Maizie had fainted.

But the danger was over. The Indian who looked in was satisfied with his inspection, and the rest, impressed by Nat's stoical calmness of manner, and well aware of the qualities of a shot-gun at close quarters, after a few words together departed in a northwesterly direction, disappeared behind a roll of prairie, and were seen no more.

The removal of the skins and blankets and a few drops of water sprinkled on her forehead soon brought Maizie round, and the wagon resumed its journey at a brisk pace. That evening a pleasant camping-ground was taken up on the shores of a tributary of the Arkansas River, and after an undisturbed night the travellers started on their way the next morning refreshed, and in cheerful spirits.

CHAPTER IV.

“ROAD AGENTS.”

THE journey in a wagon over prairie is very much like a long sea voyage. In both cases there is no change of surroundings from day to day, and people have so much of one another's company that the most distant acquaintance at the beginning ripens into intimate friendship before the end, and they seem to know more of one another in a few days than under other circumstances would be the case in a year.

In a week after the night in the Arapahoe camp Nat learnt all the family history of Maizie and Bel, and they had heard as much as he could tell them of himself. In two weeks they were calling one another by their christian names, and were as brother and sisters.

By this time the outskirts of civilization were reached and the talk round the camp-fire in the

evenings changed from reminiscences of the past to plans for the future. A great change had taken place in Nat's ideas. St. Louis and Eastern civilization were all very well, and might be realised some day, but for the present they were out of the question. The reason why Mr. Dan Shelford had objected to his daughters going by stage through Southern Colorado, and had insisted upon the journey over the trail, was a dread of "road agents" or coach-robbers, who were very active in that part of the country. This being so, Nat felt that it was his duty to see these adopted sisters of his safely under their father's protection. He therefore decided to sell his sheep at Seckersburg and take the stage for Chico Springs, Calumet Co., New Mexico. After that — well — he might go to St. Louis or elsewhere. That did not seem to matter much just now. The great point was to do his duty.

And the girls, after some faint protest on Maizie's part but none at all on Bel's, thankfully accepted the offer of escort. So the question was settled to the satisfaction of everybody except poor Shep, whom Nat decided to give to Seb Bean.

On the fourteenth day of August, just four weeks from the evening in the Two Butte Creek, Shep

corralled in the sheep-pens of Seckersburg the flock he had brought so far, and followed his master up the principal street of the city with melancholy foreboding, for Shep had a prophetic soul, and watched him purchase clothes of a quality no sheep-dog of the plains in those days had ever seen in his life.

Seckersburg City was a place of importance in 1873—more important than it is now. It was then the spot where Western stockmen from New Mexico, Northern Texas, and even from Colorado, brought the produce of their labours and met buyers from Chicago, St. Louis, and elsewhere. At the present time the railway enables producers to find a sale in their own territories, or to ship flocks and herds in the cars direct to Chicago; and the glory of Seckersburg has departed. It has shared the fate of many a town in England forty years ago, when coaches went out and railways came in.

In 1873, at this time of the year, it would have been hard to find a brisker place than Seckersburg. There were houses of wood and houses of adobe (Mexican brick), shops in abundance with enormous sign-boards, broad sandy streets, with the inevitable “side-walk” of roughly laid planks. over which passed all

day long a constant stream of persons of every shade of colour, while outside the town, and dominating all else, was a net-work of corrals for horses, cattle, and sheep.

Such a place as this was very strange to Nat and not at all pleasant. The noise of many tongues and the constant rattle of vehicles was wearing to his nerves, though he would not own it. The girls, also, though thankful to sleep once more in a bed and able to make good the ravages—too terrible for a masculine pen to describe—sustained by their wardrobe, were very glad when Nat on the third day announced with unusual animation of manner that he had concluded a bargain for his sheep, wagon, and horses for \$6000, cash down, and was ready to book seats in the Las Animas coach two days hence.

It was an extraordinary stroke of luck; but there were many things in Nat's favour. Bel, who had the knack of making friends wherever she might be, had told the landlady of the hotel the whole story of their adventures, and before noon the next day old Seb Bean was waylaid by the editor of the "Seckersburg Alarm" and turned inside out before he knew it. The next morning articles appeared which curdled the blood of the surrounding popula

tion for a month to come, and would have proved a bad business to that editor if Nat had been aware of half of what was set forth.

The immediate effect, however, of all this was to enhance the value of his property, especially as the sheep were in far better condition, thanks to Seb Bean's excellent driving, than most of the flocks on sale. But no advantage is without its seamy side, and the notoriety which put at least \$1500 into Nat's pocket very nearly caused him to lose everything.

Most men lose their heads a little when anything of this sort happens to them. Those who do not are liable to disregard too much the new circumstances in which they find themselves placed. Nat was one of the latter. Though wherever he went people flattered and caressed him, though the hotel-keeper, when he heard he was leaving so soon, offered him free quarters for a month, Nat went about as unconcernedly as the most insignificant man in town. Nor did he think twice about the possible consequences of the canvassing abroad of his affairs, financial and otherwise, and before the seats in the Western stage were booked, all Seckersburg knew that at 6 o'clock in the morning of the 18th of August Nat

was starting for New Mexico with \$6000 on his person, having refused with a frontiersman's simplicity the offer of the bank which paid him the money to give him a draft payable at their bank in Trinidad, Southern Colorado.

There was another reason besides ignorance for Nat's want of caution in this matter. He was in great anxiety about his old herder. For poor Seb, after superhuman efforts to keep sober the first day, yielded on the second without a struggle, and was discovered by Nat, after a long search, drinking brandy undiluted among a crowd of saloon bummers, who were waiting like vultures round a dying lion to strip him of everything he possessed as soon as the spirit had done its work.

Out of this crowd Nat dragged him with some difficulty, and at considerable risk to himself; and, seeing no other way of dealing with the man, took him to his own room at the hotel, put him to bed, and locked him in.

The next day Seb expressed great repentance, but Nat, knowing the way of drunkards, refused to let him out of his sight for a moment. By this means he hoped to save his old friend, for Mr. Tom Cobbett, the buyer of the sheep, had taken a fancy to him

and had engaged him to drive the flock to his ranche fifty miles north, on the day Nat departed westward.

So Bean was kept under strict supervision until bedtime on the last evening. That night he was to sleep by his sheep at the other end of the town; Shep with him securely tied up in case of accidents.

Seb nearly took Nat in his arms when he said good-night.

“You’ve been the best friend that could be, and I swear that I’ll keep from drink while I serve Cobbett. I know that’s better gratitood to you than words ’ud be. I don’ know how rightly to thank you for all—specially that dog—he’s the best I ever see. Good-night. God bless ye, friend. I’ll be round prompt at sun-up to see the coach off to-morrow.”

Another grip of the hand and Seb went his way to bed, while Nat, after watching him a moment, strolled back to the hotel and packed his small trunk, and slept without a break until dawn.

Seb went to his blankets, patted Shep, who was restless and miserable, and then lay down. But he could not sleep. He had been drinking nothing but water and coffee for three days, and the craving for liquor was strong upon him. He would have resisted

it, though the self-control meant torture such as no one who has not craved for drink can conceive, had it not been that not very far from the corrals was a saloon with open doors, from which came the clink of glasses and the popping of corks. This was too much for Seb. For a long time he lay writhing in an agony of desire, but at length he could stand it no longer, and, perspiring all over, rose with trembling limbs a beaten man.

The "saloon" was one small and dirty room. Seb's practised eye saw at once that it was a very queer place indeed, and he determined to be very moderate and limit himself to two cocktails. No one was in the room but the bar-keeper and two or three sodden-looking creatures who obsequiously made room for him. Seb ordered his cocktails in one "long glass" and carried this away to a dark corner, sipping at it very slowly. But dark as it was, the sharp-eyed bar-keeper noted well the way the old man hugged his tumbler, and before Seb was half-way through his drink a full bottle of whiskey had been placed uncorked as if by accident on the table at his right hand. Seb shrank from it.

"Take it away, tain't my order," he said angrily to the bar-keeper. But the man pretended not to

hear him, and the next moment a number of men crowded in laughing and talking, and Seb had not the courage to repeat his remonstrance. But he had no intention of yielding. At first he refused to look at the bottle at all, then, his mood changing, he glared at it, uttering an apostrophe under his breath.

“You brute — would you have me? No, sir, I guess not. I *guess* not. I feel *right* and in three ticks I walk out of here as sober — soberer, I’m sure, than when I came in. Stand there and be —— to you. You won’t tempt me.”

He took another sip of his cocktail and another and a third — each more slowly than the last. He was getting very near the end, and how long — how very long — it might be before he would taste whiskey again. He glanced sideways at the bottle. His eye caught the label. It was his favourite brand. He sighed a long and heavy sigh and took another sip. There was only enough for two more.

The room was quieter now. The men who had just come in had seated themselves at a large table near Seb’s corner and were talking in whispers. They were a rough-looking set, and Seb noticed that before they spoke a word they glanced at him

with suspicion, until reassured by a telegraphic signal from the bar-keeper. This roused Seb's curiosity, and he forgot for the moment the arch enemy at his elbow, and while appearing half-asleep listened intently to all he could catch of their conversation. At first it was too indistinct for him to make anything of it. But before long they became so interested that they forgot to whisper. The first words Seb heard came from a man who was evidently the leader of the rest. He was young, of strong frame, a swarthy skin and black curly hair. His eyes were light brown like a cat's and near together, the rest of his features coarse and rude, and, with a flat nose and thick lips, hinted at negro blood.

Seb, who as an old frontiersman, had been acquainted with men of the worst reputation from Van Buren to Santa Fé, identified this man as soon as he opened his mouth. It was Sandy Rathlee, the most skilful and desperate of road agents. The man was smiling maliciously, showing his teeth like a leopard disturbed at meat.

"You boys are enough to make one die of laughing. Women—babies—ain't in it with you for scare when you see the chance of a drop of blood.

This boy, I don't doubt, is quick. I ain't seen him, but Indian fighting is smart business. Yet he's one and we are six, with Dick on the box to make seven. Where the risk comes in is a puzzle to me.”

“Aye, that may be, perhaps,” rejoined another man, distinguishable by having only one eye, a long white scar across his left cheek, and no heels to his boots. “But there's another side to it, Sandy—blow as you will. A man with \$6000 and two gells in hand ain't a lamb whose tail I'd care to try twisting. We ain't no more scared than you, but I sez and I sez again we must heft all our chances beforehand. I want to hear the plan you've worked out; if I don't approve of it you'll be five not six to-morrow.”

Sandy Rathlee's answer to this suggestion was a glance that gave him a still greater likeness to an angry leopard and a hint to the speaker to remove himself with all possible dispatch. The others neither stirred nor spoke, but two of them nodded at the one-eyed man, who, thereupon, chuckled in an aggressive manner.

Rathlee's face changed at once. He became as mild as a purring cat.

“We waste time, boys, fooling. Of course you shall heft all chances. See here: Clinter’s Ford is the place I fixed on. It’s a soft bit at the bottom of a steep hill, you know it? Driver Dick will handle his mules so that the wheels get stuck in the sand. The passengers will be ordered out to ease the coach, and as they come out we take them. See? I’ll hold the Comanche myself, and leave the tenderfeet and the two outside men to the rest of ye. How’s that, Ned?”

Ned, the one-eyed man, grunted.

“Healthy enough, boss, the way you word it. When it comes to doing, knots in the rope may be found. First, him you call Comanche will have ears on his head longer than a Jack-rabbit and will hear us likely. If so, he’ll shoot. How about their lives?”

Sandy Rathlee’s face changed again. It now wore the look of the leopard anticipating dinner.

“Kill the men, boy, and take the women away. Dick can keep the mails, and drive on lickity-dash, and when he gets near Las Animas swear he’d had to drive through fire to save them. That’ll give him credit. He ain’t responsible for his passengers. We are.” The man laughed softly, his laugh being re-echoed by the rest.

Who shall describe poor Seb Bean's condition of mind now?

At the first words all the whiskey he had taken mounted to his head until his brain seemed on fire, and he was within an ace of leaping upon Sandy Rathlee. But luckily he had not taken enough for this madness, and so he sat quiet, grasping the table and trembling all over. Then came a reaction and his one thought was to conceal himself so that he might hear all the men's plans. A panic seized him lest he might suddenly be recognised as Nat's herder. The danger to himself did not trouble him, but if he were shot the conspiracy would never be found out. The only course he could take was to sit perfectly still and listen and wait.

Inaction when one is in a state of suppressed excitement is trying at the best of times. To Seb, fearful as he was of being recognised, it was unbearable, and to brace his nerves he mechanically filled his tumbler from the bottle beside him and sipped at the liquor feverishly.

The men talked till midnight, and still Seb sat there with averted face, listening. At length they trooped out, casting suspicious glances at the old

man, who now seemed to be asleep, his head pillowed on his arms, the bottle at his side half empty.

As the door closed behind them Seb rose and felt in his pocket for money. His brain was reeling and the room swayed and whirled about him, but he did not believe he was drunk, for he remembered every word spoken by the gang. He walked with a fairly steady step to the bar and paid his bill. Then he went out into the night. A cool wind met him and fanned his burning temples. He placed his hand there and tried to think. What had he to do? It was to tell Nat—was it Nat? Yes, tell Nat—what? He had forgotten. Never mind, it would come back to him in the morning, things always did. He would go to bed, wake early, and all would be right. With some difficulty he staggered back to the corral, and creeping between his blankets dropped into a deep lethargic sleep.

The night passed, and the day broke bright and unclouded. Seb slept on. The coach rattled round to the hotel door and the passengers took their places. The clock struck six. Driver Dick, who had been chatting with the keeper of the hotel and drawing on his gloves, swung himself into his seat. Nat and the other "outsiders" scrambled to their

places. “All aboard” was shouted with a will, and with a crack of the long-lashed whip they were off at a hand gallop, while Seb, snoring peacefully, slept on still. But a minute later there came a sound within a few feet of him which might have awakened the dead. The howl and yell of a dog frantically struggling to be free. At a turn of the road the coach passed the corral and Shep saw his master’s face, and knew that all he loved in the world had gone from him. It was well that his collar was tight, and his strap plaited raw-hide. He struggled and tore at it like a mad creature, while his piercing, heart-rending cries roused half the town. Seb woke at last. He sat up slowly, groaning at a racking pain that smote him in the forehead as he moved, and made it throb again. Shep’s cries continued. For a minute Bean stared stupidly at the animal, but the next he was on his feet, more frantic than the dog, and was rushing bare-headed, with shirt unbuttoned, his uncombed hair and fiery eyes telling sad tales of his debauch—wildly into the town.

Seckersburg was just beginning to bestir itself and lounge on the side-walk in its shirt sleeves. The spectacle of an old man of disreputable appear-

ance panting and gasping and asking where he could find the sheriff was interesting, and not only did Seb receive ready assistance in his search, but by the time he reached the sheriff's abode he had a score of followers, who, to heighten the dramatic effect of the situation, hammered and kicked at the sheriff's door with a vigour that caused that worthy to open it, cocked pistol in hand.

By this time, Seb had worked himself up to such a pitch that instead of asking for a private interview and telling his story within closed doors, he blurted it out then and there. Nothing could have been more fatal. The sheriff of Seckersburg was at the best of times not quite the man of action persons in his position ought to be. Nor had he the quickest of perceptions. And this morning, as a crowning misfortune, he had risen with toothache and was in a very bad temper. He listened perforce to Seb's somewhat incoherent account of all he had overheard, but the moment the old man stopped, said contemptuously:

"What was he doing in Killman's saloon? Would he depose on oath that he was sober, and had been sober since? Any one could see that he was drunk now. As for the men described, he (the

sheriff) knew nothing of them and cared less. Anyway, the coach had started and nothing could stop it now; besides, Driver Dick was a straight man, a dead shot, and had never been boarded by road agents before, and that was all he had to say.” After which speech bang went the door in Seb’s face, and he was left with his crowd of supporters, who reviled him in choice language. The old herder was nearly mad, and foaming at the lips threw himself against the sheriff’s door with a force that nearly sent it off its hinges. The crowd cheered this, then decamped to a safe distance, for the sheriff was a bad man to rouse, and Colt’s revolvers carry far.

At this moment a man pushed his way through the people and laid a firm hand on Seb’s shoulder. It was Tom Cobbett, his present master. Bean grasped his hand.

“Now I’ll get some hearing,” he panted, and at once began, more disjointedly than before, to tell his story. Cobbett took in the situation at a glance.

“Come out of this,” he said roughly, taking hold of the old man’s arm. “Both you and your story will go to Kingdom Come together in another minute. I didn’t contract for you to perform for the amusement of Seckersburg. Come with me.”

Resolution, quiet but inflexible, has at all times great force with excitable people, and though Cobbett was half the size of Seb, the old man yielded at once, and amid the jeering laughter of the rabble, meekly allowed himself to be led away.

Cobbett said nothing until he had conveyed his herder to a room behind the bar of the hotel. Arriving there he ordered a bottle of soda-water, and made Seb drink it. Then he said in a business-like tone:

“Now we can get to work. Just start that tale of yours again. This time from the beginning. I’m here to listen. Sheriff was not. That is a difference. Fire away.”

Seb did so. Tom Cobbett neither moved nor spoke till he had heard the last word. Then he swore, at first under his breath, then aloud. Finally, he took a quick turn up and down the room, pulling up in front of Bean, who was eagerly watching him.

“What’s your idea, Seb?”

The old man made a gesture of despair.

“Would a horse—”

“No,” snapped the little man, “it wouldn’t. I know the team Dick’s got, and you may bet he’ll make ’em fly to-day. There ain’t nothing in town that could catch ’em with the start they’ve had. The

horses here are weedy. Try again. — What’s that noise from the corral?”

It was the long mournful howl of a dog that has abandoned itself to despair.

“It’s *his* dog,” said Seb huskily. “He woke me with his yowling. Guess he saw the coach, for the road ain’t far from there. He’s been at it ever since.”

Cobbett nodded, and then began to walk up and down again. Suddenly he stopped, and his brow cleared.

“I’ve got it. Come out.”

They left the hotel and went to the corral.

“Look!” cried Cobbett. “That dog is in first-rate condition. Clever too, ain’t he? Well, then, send *him*.”

Seb stared at his employer stupidly.

“But he can’t speak.”

“Fool—he’ll carry a letter. The point is, will he catch the coach. He’ll run like a fox, and they do change horses somewhere before Clinter’s Ford. We’ll try it, anyway. Can you write? Here’s pencil and paper. Now that won’t do. Let me have it. So, so. You sign it. Come, man, you must have the credit, not me. There. Now put it on him.”

A dozen words had been written in Mr. Cobbett's clear, round handwriting, Seb's signature scrawled at the bottom, and the letter was folded underneath Shep's collar and tied there securely. The dog was quiet enough, seeming to understand when Seb caressed him and told him he was going to his master. Now all was done, and he was led in leash to the coach road. Then Seb spoke Nat's name distinctly, pointed to the road, and let the dog go free.

A joyous bound in the air as if to make sure it was true, one loud ringing bark of gratitude and delight, and straight down the road flew Shep at a pace which made Cobbett draw a breath of relief.

He put his hand within Seb Bean's arm, and they stood there in silence watching the black body grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared altogether.

"There are men," said the little stockman sententiously, yet with a ring of earnestness in his voice, "who tell us that animals have no souls. I have always thought these men were fools. Now, my friend, I know it."

CHAPTER V.

JEFFERSON COLLINGWOOD, COWBOY.

THE Las Animas coach, as Mr. Cobbett prophesied, wasted no time upon its way. The driver, whatever his moral character might be, understood the art of managing horses, and, with little expenditure of breath or use of whip, got an amount of speed out of them which placed him high in the esteem of his passengers. Even Nat, who was on the top of the coach with Bel—Maizie preferring, she said, to ride inside—complimented Driver Dick, who seemed to appreciate the attention.

The driver of a Western stage, like the conductor of a Western train, is a man of great authority,—often as despotic in his way as the captain of a man-of-war. It was therefore felt by the other “outsides” a special distinction for Nat when the driver drew his attention to a ford they were crossing and launched into a recital of an attempt made

to rob the coach some years ago, which had been frustrated through what he modestly described as "a little play on my own part, so they say." This story ended with the display of a handsome gold watch. "From the boss of the line, sir. Since when," concluded Driver Dick complacently, "I've carried ten thousand in silver often. I told the Government Agent I'd insure it myself. As far as *this* coach is concerned all such fooling stopped dead, five year ago to-day."

The morning passed quickly. Bel was in the highest possible spirits, and divided her time between asking the driver questions about the road, and telling Nat the plans Maizie and she were making for their life in New Mexico. It does not fall to the lot of many Western men to be the sole confidant and friend of a charming girl, and to Nat after his life of loneliness and hardship it was a very precious privilege indeed. Those who had known him before he started for the East would have seen a remarkable change in his face. Many of the hard lines had been sponged out, as it were, his eyes had softened, his speech was less abrupt and his voice less harsh. In manners, too, he was fast becoming a civilized being. This was due to

constant efforts on the part of the girls, who had laid deep plots when he was out of hearing to bring him up in the way he should go, and carried them out with great success.

From the day, however, that they reached Seckersburg, these things ceased to be. Hotels in Western towns are hotbeds of scandal and gossip, and the first evening Maizie overheard some remarks which had wounded her sensitive soul very deeply. She would not tell Bel what they were, and even professed contempt for them, but Bel noticed that from that time forth Maizie was far more reserved in her manner towards Nat.

Such conduct was fatal to Nat's education. Bel, though quick to notice things, stood too much in awe of him to speak about them. It had always been Maizie who had given expression to any objections. Therefore, in Seckersburg, though Bel suffered much she had no remedy. Nat, in the innocence of his heart, bought and wore an obtrusively brilliant red necktie; he came down to table d'hote breakfast without a coat, and marched about town with his trousers tucked into his boots, cowboy fashion, but Maizie said not a word, and when Bel beseeched her to interfere the only answer she received was:

“It is not our business at all — at least not mine. You talk to him if you like. I have thought about it and have quite made up my mind, and I—I am rather tired of the subject, dear.”

Now when Maizie said she was tired of a subject Bel knew by experience that the wisest course was to leave her alone. The best of women have a thorny side, and Maizie's showed itself if she were questioned after she had “made up her mind.”

The “subject” was not mentioned between them again. Bel, after racking her girlish brain—for Bel was barely eighteen—to imagine what was the matter with Maizie, came to the conclusion that Nat's latest atrocities in the way of dress had proved too much for her sister's critical taste. This opinion was further strengthened by a habit Maizie began to indulge in of finding excuses to be away when Nat gave them the benefit of his exclusive attention, and though even Bel could not discover whether Nat noticed it, still the thing was done. Bel was indignant at the slight to their friend, and though it must be confessed she did not always find Nat cheerful company, she did her best to make him think so. To-day she tried harder than usual, causing Nat to become an object of the keenest envy to one at least of the two other outside

passengers. They were young men, rough and sun-burnt about the face and hands, dressed in rude Western attire of flannel shirt and overalls; and only the whip lashes twisted round their hats, and tight, dandified boots, would have betrayed to the inexperienced eye that they were "cowboys." They were returning from a visit to friends in Kansas City to take part in an autumn "round-up" of cattle in Colorado.

Tam Sanderson, the younger, a fair-haired, blue-eyed lad of twenty, was going to the ranche of a brother in Las Animas. He had just become engaged to a girl in Kansas, and spent his time just now in dreaming of his marriage—an occupation very soothing for his love-sick soul but somewhat dull for his companion. This man, Jefferson Collingwood, was of a very different type. He was only two years older than Sanderson, but looked thirty. Broad-shouldered and deep-chested, swarthy of complexion and square of face, with eyes as black as beads, and short bristly black hair growing low. He was a man with a history, for he had left home at thirteen and had made his own way since then without help from a soul. But there was little resemblance between his life and Nat's. A restless, nervous, energetic person was Jefferson Col-

lingwood. It was said of him that whatever he did he did well but that he never did it for long. He had travelled in search of work, in deference to this constitutional restlessness, over nearly the whole of the Western states, and was equally at home in a mining camp in California or on a stockman's ranche in Colorado. No man could ride better, or use a lasso more unerringly; he could work an engine or break in a broncho equally well. He was invaluable where railway construction was going on in dangerous places, and knew everything that was worth knowing about all kinds of animals. He was good-tempered and honest as the day, yet he never succeeded, never saved money, and at three and twenty, barring the fact that he had good clothes and a few dollars to buy a horse and saddle at his journey's end, had not a cent more behind him than when his father whipped him ten years ago for some trifling fault, and he left home to seek his fortune.

To-day he felt more restless than he had ever felt before. Tam Sanderson had been his dearest friend for ten years and had depended upon him like a younger brother. Now Tam wanted him no longer; and though their affection for one another would last their lives, the old tie was broken. Jeff had no other friend. Like the Miller of Dee he "cared for

nobody — nobody cared for him," — with the difference that his loneliness was not taken cheerfully. He felt, when he mounted the coach that morning, utterly out of tune, and only longed for the hard work of the round-up to make him forget himself. Upon this mood, like a shaft of sunlight piercing the window of a prison cell, stole the music of a fresh young voice and the vision of a beautiful woman. Bel was not really beautiful to persons of experience and impartial judgment, but to Jeff she was divine. His brain seemed to catch fire. He trembled all over, and felt as weak as a baby, and turning his face so that he could see her without being intrusive sat as still as a stone, with his teeth clenched, in love to the depth of his soul, in love — for the first time in his life.

The morning passed. At noon they paused to take refreshment. Only ten minutes were allowed, as Driver Dick said part of the road was bad driving at night. But in the course of that ten minutes Jeff Collingwood had contrived to make Nat's acquaintance, which was some compensation, though not much, for the discovery that Nat's companion was going to continue the journey inside the coach with her sister.

The road was still smooth; but ahead were the blue outlines of the first range of hills, the outpost of the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. The day was hot, and the wind dropped to a mere breath. The horses showed signs of flagging. And now the driver appeared in a less favourable light; for, knotting his whip, he gave the poor beasts no respite, and by the time the sun set and the station of Jacksonville was reached, the team was in a lather and well-nigh exhausted. Here there was to be an interval of half an hour; the horses were to be changed, and the passengers to have an opportunity of stretching their cramped limbs. The end of their journey was to be reached about midnight.

Jacksonville was the centre of a small farming settlement. Butter, eggs, and milk were sold and eagerly bought by the travellers. After supper a few minutes still remained before the time of starting, and Nat proposed a stroll. Jeff and his friend came also, and for a little while Jeff had his heart's desire and talked to Bel. It was a pleasant evening for walking, and they went further than they knew. They were only recalled, indeed, by shouts from the hotel.

Driver Dick was fuming when they came up. Maizie, who saw most things, thought to herself that

she had never seen a face she liked less. One after the other the men scrambled to their places. Nat was the last, and had his foot on the step, when some one called out : —

“Hello, what d’ye make that on the road behind?”

Nat turned his head, and by the waning light saw a dog coming slowly towards them limping on three legs. By this time Dick was in his place, and had grasped the reins for a start. Deeply he swore under his breath, when Nat, in a tone that admitted of no contradiction, cried —

“Hold a minute. I must get down.”

And down he sprang forthwith, with something in his eyes that burnt and irritated them most uncomfortably. In another moment he was on his knees in the road, and Shep was licking his face all over with a dry, parched tongue, too exhausted even to whine.

If the girls, accustomed to Nat’s immobility of manner, had thought him incapable of expressing tenderness, they were undeceived now. Driver Dick might growl about waste of time, and mutter at the foolishness of some persons about a cur he’d liefer shoot than caress, but there was no question of a further parting between Nat and the dog which had followed him so far. Five precious minutes were spent in giving him a

little water, examining his bleeding feet, and drawing a thorn from one of them, and then Nat lifted him tenderly in his arms and placed him under the care of Maizie and Bel inside the coach.

No one had seen the note. Shep had plunged into a pool at the roadside, and the paper had become nearly black with mud. It was not until the mud completely dried that the girls at last discovered something which they could not understand tied round his collar, cut it away, and by the light of the swinging coach lamp—for it was nearly dark—deciphered its contents.

“Warning. Six road agents will stop you at Clin-ter’s Ford. Driver Dick in it.

“SEBASTIAN BEAN.”

Bel read it first and gave a little scream, severely startling the other inside passengers,—two elderly gentlemen of peaceable exterior, who were going to visit friends in Colorado. They anxiously inquired what was the matter, and Bel was about to enlighten them when Maizie pinched her, and she coughed violently instead.

“The young lady is not ill, I hope,” one of them said politely, staring at the paper.

"Thank you," said Maizie; "she is better now. We have received some bad news."

The girls retired to the furthest corner of the coach, and whispered together, while the gentlemen fell into a gentle doze, blissfully unaware of the prospect before them.

The question for the girls was how to get the note into Nat's hands without attracting attention. How near were they to Clinter's Ford? For a few moments they discussed and rediscussed a variety of plans and expedients, and Bel in desperation was about to bring the coach to a standstill under pretence of faintness, when the strain of the team began to slacken, and the driver pulled up of his own accord. Was *this* Clinter's Ford? The girls rushed to the door. It was only the bottom of a long hill, and the men were getting off to ease the team. The gentlemen inside, observing this, also alighted.

"Nat," said Maizie, in a voice as clear and cool as spring water, "will you examine Shep a moment. Something is the matter."

When Nat emerged from the coach, which was steadily pursuing its way up hill, he was accosted by Driver Dick.

"Ef that dog of yours is sick, friend, I'll trouble

you to put him out. His fare will be heavy, else, for you. The Company's very partieler about their furniture."

Nat laughed.

"The furniture has not suffered — yet."

The driver grunted, and muttered sulkily to himself, while Nat, humming a tune, crossed the road to where Tam and Jeff were walking together. He slipped between them from behind, and gripped the arm of each, whispering two words :

"Road agents."

He wondered how they would take the news. Neither of them started at the ominous words. Without speaking they turned to look at him questioningly and by the last gleam of the fading twilight he saw that their eyes were as steady as his own.

They slackened their pace and the coach drew on ahead.

"How did you hear?"

"A note was tied on my dog's neck."

Nat then repeated the words Cobbett had written.

"It's genuine, for I know my old herder's signature. Where's Clinter's Ford?"

"The bottom of this hill, two miles further," said

Jeff Collingwood, adding, in a matter-of-fact tone, "First point is Driver Dick. Shall we tie him up or shoot him?"

Nat pressed his arm.

"Wait a bit. This is my funeral, for I have \$6000 on board. It got round town, likely, that I was carrying it and this is the consequence. Now, it is not fair that my foolishness should hurt others. Can't we strike some plan by which they'll have my money or me, and leave the rest alone?"

Nat spoke earnestly, and had a great deal more to say, but Jeff Collingwood interrupted him with some heat.

"Now, just stop right there and talk sense. Next thing will be that you'll want to know how much we would fight *for*. You don't know us, stranger, not a little bit. *Your* funeral, indeed? What bosh! Here's Tam, who has a girl back East; isn't his life worth something? As for me—you'll excuse me if I am speaking of your sister—but no road agent that was ever born will so much as look into that girl's brown eyes without going through me first. But we've *talked* enough. The question is, who's to run the outfit, you or me? What experience have you?"

"I was with the Comanche five years as a boy."

"You *were*! Then we elect you Captain without voting. Now for business, please."

While the men talked they had been following the coach at a safe distance. They paused here and shook hands, each registering an oath to himself that he would stand by the others to the death.

"Well then," Nat said, as if he were continuing a sentence, "my idea is to bind Dick, and push on. Can you drive four?"

"Drive twenty if the harness will hold them. Where'll we put Dick?"

"Inside, with my dog to watch him. You will take the lines, wear Dick's hat and coat and drive *through*. Your partner and I will lie on the top and pick off any who catch at the leaders. Their plans will depend a good deal upon Dick pulling in at a nasty place. If we can keep going they will lose a chance. That's my notion."

Jeff chuckled.

"I am with you entirely. Tam, boy, you must take my new Winchester. You are very spry at snap shots. As for me, while I can hold a line all the road agents on the trail may try their worst. Ah, see,—we're at the hilltop now. Driver Dick

must not have the trouble of climbing again. Close round, boys."

The last gleam of daylight had gone and the road which the coach had now to traverse looked like sheer descent into the pit of Tophet—and it would be little less to a driver who did not know the way. The coach lamps only gave a faint light for a few yards, and left the gloom behind blacker than before. The leaders were in almost total darkness.

Driver Dick was getting very sulky.

"Late by two minutes," he said, in a reproachful tone. "What kind of a show do I get to make my time, this way?"

He held the reins in his hand and his foot was on the first step. The light of the coach lamp shone full on his face. Something touched his neck behind, a hard round rim of steel.

"The game's up," said a stern voice. It was Nat's. "Drop these lines and keep still."

The driver neither stirred nor spoke. He drew a long breath between clenched teeth and shivered, but he did not let go the reins.

"If you so much as sneeze," Nat continued, "or move a finger, I fire. *Drop those lines.*"

The reins fell to the ground and the team, four

large mules, started, but Tam Sanderson was already at the leaders' heads and quieted them. In obedience to an order from Nat he unhooked one of the coach lamps and Dick was forced to walk some paces to the left. His pockets were then turned inside out by Jeff, and two pistols and a long knife abstracted therefrom. All this, under Nat's revolver, the man submitted to without a word or a struggle. He made no inquiries and attempted no defence. Therein he showed acute knowledge of men and things. Nothing is more irritating to a Western man than question or argument when he is about such work as this. Any pretence of innocence or protest on the part of Driver Dick would have resulted in rough handling and seriously endangered his life. So, hard as it was, he ground his teeth and said nothing, watching every movement of his captors, his muscles braced to take advantage of the least slackening of vigilance on their part. But he was in the hands of men who were in desperate earnest. While Jeff searched him and Nat covered a vital part of his body, finger on trigger, Tam roused the people in the coach, and persuaded the Eastern gentlemen, not without some difficulty, to allow the rope with which one of their trunks was bound to be used for

tying up the prisoner. This was done in a deft and workmanlike manner by Jeff, and with the addition of a stout gag the man was taken by head and heels and deposited on the floor of the coach under guard of Shep, and the Eastern gentlemen — *alias* tenderfeet in Western parlance — who, having been made fully acquainted with the facts, breathed the most terrible threats against the prisoner. The girls were then placed in the innermost recess of the coach, while, as a further safeguard against any stray shots, a barricade of cushions was skilfully made by Tam against the windows.

While this was being done Jeff donned Dick's hat and coat, loaded his shotgun, and mounted to his seat, reins in hand. Nat gave the word "All aboard," and with a swing and a jerk the coach started downhill, — six desperate men awaiting it at the Ford below, and Las Animas and safety twenty miles beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ATTACK AT CLINTER'S FORD.

JEFF COLLINGWOOD had driven in his time every kind of creature with four legs, from a donkey to a thoroughbred, and he knew every inch of the Las Animas road. Yet, with four hard-mouthed mules in first-rate condition, a winding "down grade" to travel over, and a topheavy, clumsily built coach behind, the best driver in the universe might be pardoned for nervousness.

Little recked Jeff of difficulty or risk. His face was full of resolution, his nerves steady. Danger came to him as a friend. Squarely he sat, one foot on the brake, and one on the footboard, to keep his balance true. He held the reins with a firm yet elastic grasp, keeping his team well under control.

Fast they went, their speed increasing as they approached the Ford until the leaders were galloping and the strain upon Jeff's muscles to keep the shafters

in collar was so great as to burst the seams of Driver Dick's coat.

One more turn of the road, and then —

“Be ready,” growled Jeff to the others.

A steep decline, a river rippling a few inches deep over gravel, a bank on the other side rising sandy and steep to the road beyond — this was Clinter's Ford.

Down the decline the coach thundered with the impetus of an express train. Into the water, splash, throwing spray high in the air to right and left. The leaders reached the bank, and sank to their knees in the yielding sand, but with the shafters close behind recovered themselves in a moment and sprang forward.

Crack! The report of two rifles, fired over the coach, rang out on either side, and a voice clear and biting cried loudly :

“Hold, you driver, or we plug you through.”

No reply from the coach.

The mules, held well together, and frightened at the noise, plunged forward. One more effort, and the stage would be on firm ground.

But now four figures sprang out of the darkness and seized the reins.

A flash from the roof of the coach, and a sharp double report; a cry, and the leaders sprang free. At the same moment the knife edge of the driver's whip swept across their backs, and the coach advanced another yard. But the mules in the shafts were held, and the one on the near side, a mare, dropped on its knees.

"Pick 'em off!" yelled Jeff, standing erect and whirling his whip round his head.

Ping! — a bullet from Nat's revolver sped, and the shafter on the off side shook himself free with a savage kick which crushed the chest bone of the man who had stopped him. A scream came from behind. The coach door had been forced. Nat flew to the rear, Tam following. Jeff was deserted.

All the mules were free but the mare. By the dim lamp-light Jeff saw a man holding her with one hand, and in the other something which flashed — a knife. With all his force Jeff aimed a blow at the ruffian's face with his whip. The lash struck him fairly across the eyes, and raised a livid line of flesh. He lost his hold of the mare, and she sprang to her feet.

"Get up there!"

Jeff's call was like a trumpet note, and with a

bound the faithful beasts threw themselves into the collar simultaneously, and pulled as only four strong mules can pull. A wrench, a heave, the grating of wheels in the sand, and the coach reached firm ground at last.

Rifle bullets whizzed round Jeff's head like hail, and Driver Dick's hat was riddled through and through; but they flew high, and the mules, breaking into a gallop, soon carried the coach out of range.

What had happened inside? A cold perspiration broke out on Jeff's forehead as he thought of the possibility of the girls having been seized. But he was reassured by hearing laughter, and then Tam rejoined him and told him that all was right.

Some time elapsed before Nat appeared again. A road agent had succeeded in making good an entrance into the coach when his friends had stopped it, frightening the Eastern gentlemen into fits, and making Bel scream. But when Nat arrived he found the man on his back, struggling with Shep, who had sprung gallantly at his throat, and was worrying him. So vigorous was the dog's attack that the road agent called loudly for quarter, and as he had hurt no one but himself, was allowed to escape.

Nat, after quieting those inside, resumed his place on the box in cheerful spirits. He found Jeff gloomy and anxious.

“The brute who caught the near shaft mule,” he said with a groan, “struck her somewhere, and I doubt her lasting out. Cowardly skunk! By good luck he had not time for more than one blow, for I branded him well across the eyes, and if we meet a century ahead, I shall know him again. But she is bleeding badly. What are we to do if she drops? Those road agents will be on our track by now, and there will be no time to change harness and pull the old outfit to Las Animas with three beasts. But let us keep hoping. Tell me about the fun inside.”

Nat told him, and then they fell silent, watching the wounded mule. Once Nat suggested a halt to examine her.

“No, sir,” said Jeff, with emphasis, “if you will take my word. Do you see how she goes,—her ears like fans, her nostrils spread wide, her head held high, and her nose in the air? She’s hard hit, I tell you; and if she were to stop now, maybe she would never move again. Let her go and she may last miles. At present she is worth all the other three. Their legs are well enough, but they have not her heart.

Don't think I like such business. If it was safe, I would put her out of her pain, and we would trust to the rest. But it is not safe. Why does she keep up, you say? Ah, you don't know the breed as I do. There are people who will tell you that horses are the noblest of animals. They are to some extent. But for courage and constancy, give me a mule every time. This beast is in mortal agony every step she takes. I know it by her eyes. In her state a horse would curl up and drop, and have done with it. But that mule will go on as long as her heart will beat. God bless her! Mules are vicious and mean it is true. I dare swear this one has killed her man before now. But to-night she has taken the other track, and will save us if she can. Hist! what's that? Your ears will be better than mine, but if I don't mistake it's the patter of hoofs behind."

"I've heard it," Nat answered, "for the last three minutes. They are gaining steadily. There are six horses,—which is strange, for I could have sworn two men at least were dropped at the Ford. And I only saw six when they began."

Jeff looked at him admiringly.

"I wish I had your eyes and ears. It would be nothing for them to have picked up others. Road

agents are like crows. They seem to come out of the air when anything is to be had."

There was a pause, then Jeff said in a low voice : —

"The funeral must be made extensive if they run us down. Make up your mind to that. I caught a glimpse of the leader, and the gang is Sandy Rath-lee's. They will stick at nothing. Sandy is a devil of devils. If we are caught or killed, God help the women !"

There was no more said after this for a long time. Jeff set himself to the task of husbanding the strength of his team, while Nat and Tam held a consultation about the plans of defence if the worst came and the coach broke down.

Everything depended now on the wounded mule. The moon had risen, and the men on the coach, being more or less under cover, had not much to fear from the enemy as long as they could keep going. If, on the other hand, they came to a stand-still, the road agents would fall upon them like a pack of wolves.

Mile after mile went by, and there was no change visible in the mare. The enemy were not far behind now, but they kept their distance. The experience

they had gained at the Ford did not encourage unnecessary exposure.

"The brute who stabbed her is one of them, you may depend," said Jeff. "He knows where he struck, and they are waiting for her to drop."

Half an hour passed. Ten miles had been covered, but there were ten more to come. The road, which had been level so far, was now beginning to rise, and the work of the mules was harder. Jeff kept his eyes anxiously on the mare, but breathed freely, for she went, if anything, more vigorously than before, and seemed to make nothing of the hill.

"The worst bit is here," he said to Nat. "Once we top this rise the way is easy and smooth, and they will only have to *go*. If she can stand this pull—if she only can!"

Slowly the time passed on, but the mule's strength held. Jeff's trouble was to keep the rest of the team up to her pace. The poor beasts were weary and inclined to flag, and whip and hand and voice had to be used unsparingly. It was hard work. The perspiration streamed down Jeff's face and he became so hoarse that he could hardly make himself heard, but his energy triumphed, and the pace held.

The crest of the hill was close at hand. It was very

steep here and the road was full of loose stones. Twice the leaders stumbled, and the off-shafter once, but the mare never winced or failed. At last the top was reached and the strain was over.

The men felt no relief, however, for, behind, the smiting of the hoofs upon the road grew louder; and now, at last, the mule was giving way. She limped a little, and at intervals shuddered so convulsively that her harness shook. When this happened she would almost come to a standstill, but immediately afterwards gathered herself together with an effort and dashed forward as fast if not faster than before. Her breath, now coming in deep sobs, told how near the end must be.

Another mile passed, and still the road agents held back, and still the mule ran on. The end was coming fast. The sobbing breaths were now accompanied by an ominous rattle in the throat, and the blood poured from her nostrils in a stream. Now from behind there came two rifle shots; the men were closing in.

The mule seemed to hear the sound. Her head, which had been drooping lower and lower, was suddenly raised with a defiant snort, her pace quickened so that it was all the rest of the team could do to keep up with her. For a minute even the enemy

were out-distanced and fell behind. Then the end came.

With a cry, human in its anguish, she staggered and nearly fell. By a great struggle she recovered herself and sprang forward a few more paces, just preventing an overturn of the coach, then her hind quarters sank under her, and she fell on her side—dead.

Without a word Jeff leapt to the ground and threw his reins away—the mules being glad enough to stand—and drawing his revolver ran to the coach door. Nat was there, and they stood side by side. Above them lay Tam, the shotgun in his hand and a rifle by his side. He was to form the reserve.

The enemy charged up with a yell. But before they reached the coach, before the defenders had fired a shot, the trampling of many horses was heard and from the front came a voice deep as a growl of thunder.

“Road agents, by the Lord! Right and left, boys. Fire on every one who moves. Quick, or they’ll slip away. S’help us all, what luck; it’s the gang of Sandy Rathlee.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE WORDS OF A WISE MAN.

THE road agents had fallen into the lion's jaws. The owner of the stentorian voice was Dave Calderon, the sheriff of Las Animas County; and with him were a score of sheriff's officers. Resistance was out of the question. Two escaped—Sandy Rathlee and the man who stabbed the mule. The rest surrendered at discretion.

Mr. Calderon was a man of swift action. With his own hands he wounded one road agent and shot the horse of another. Then he sprang off his horse and opened the coach door.

“How are we here? Glad to see you standing fire, boys. Let *me* pass, though, I guess. Ah—ha? Women-folk—beg pardon—ladies.” Off came his hat, and he bowed like a Spanish grandee. “A prisoner, by George! What—Dick? Well, I’m—beg pardon ladies—blessed! Bad—bad—bad.

Boys" — to the men outside — "lend a hand here. Ladies and gentlemen, step out, please. No danger. Allow me, ma'am. Now, good dog, don't get hurt by biting me."

All this in a breath, and then, bareheaded, he handed Maizie and Bel from the coach, beaming upon them more like a jovial Santa Claus than the grim police-officer he was. But when he saw their faces under the coach lamp he started.

"What's this? Ain't I speaking to Maizie and Bel Shelford, of Chico Springs? I thought my eyes weren't going back on me yet. You don't recollect me, I see. How should ye? You was both little tots when I saw you last. If the world don't run round fast — when I see you grown-up women! But you are not hurt anyways, or robbed? — tell me that?"

He had taken Maizie's hand in his right and Bel's in his left, and was shaking them both heartily.

In reply to their assurances that they were safe, and in full possession of all their belongings, he shook hands again, and, in the transport of his feelings, seemed about to kiss them. He refrained, on second thoughts, and laughed instead. Then seeing that others wished to speak to him he became the sheriff again at once.

"Are you boys passengers? Had a tight time, I guess. I'll want to hear all about this. But we must get into town first. Who ran the coach through after Dick was tied up — you?"

He spoke to Nat.

"No."

"Who then?"

"The man who is hitching up now."

The sheriff turned on his heel and went to Jeff, who was readjusting harness as coolly as if the coach belonged to him.

"Your name, young man?"

The tone was sharp and official, and Jeff looked up with a frown without answering. He met a bronzed, eagle face, and answered almost in spite of himself.

"Jefferson Collingwood."

The sheriff's eyes softened.

"Jefferson Collingwood — you are a brave man."

Jeff shook his head.

"You ran the stage through, I hear —"

"Do you believe all you hear?"

"Not likely."

"Then don't believe that."

Jeff unhooked one of the coach lamps and held it close to the ground.

“It was this mule, not me. She was struck as you see at the Ford. In mortal agony she ran fifteen miles without whip or rein, until death stopped her here. We have all done our best, but that would have served us little. This beast saved us. I tell you if I can ever find the man who drew her life blood I will kill him, though it be ten years hence. That I solemnly swear.”

While Jeff was speaking, the sheriff looked at him with his head on one side like an inquiring bird. When he had finished, the old man grunted, whether in sympathy or contempt it would be hard to say, gave him a huge slap on the back, and left him as abruptly as he came.

Great was the excitement in the town of Las Animas when the coach, with its escort of sheriff's officers and their prisoners, arrived an hour later. A man had been sent on by the sheriff; and every comfort, and a warm welcome, awaited the belated travellers. The girls retired at once, worn out with the fatigues of the day, but Nat and Jeff, from whom the sheriff gathered all the details of the attempted robbery, did not get to bed until nearly

sunrise the next morning. As a consequence they slept well into the afternoon and found they could not go further West until the following day.

They spent the evening together, and a very memorable evening it was to at least one of the party. Jeff, to whom, in spite of his emphatic disclaimers, the rest considered they owed their safety, was made much of by every one, and continued to make the most of his opportunities. Sheriff Calderon was with them part of the time, and while he talked about old days with Maizie, and Nat listened, Jeff conversed with Bel to his heart's content. I fear that we cannot honestly say that the conduct of Bel this night was quite what it ought to have been. She had known Mr. Collingwood little more than twenty-four hours. Yet she treated him like an old friend, and chattered away about her life in St. Louis, her friends and her thoughts in general; listened with bright sympathy to some of his experiences, and questioned him in her sweetest tones about himself, until Jeff's heart and pulse were bounding with rapture and—such is the vanity of first love—even with hope. The day before he had been in love with a vision of womanhood which seemed as far away as the stars, to-day he loved one

whose eyes appeared to grow brighter when she heard his voice; to whom he told reminiscences no living soul had ever heard him speak about before, and who, best of all, told him about herself as freely as if she felt he had a right to know what her life had been.

When, at last, the evening had flown, and Jeff was left to think alone, he found himself almost giddy with happiness. Sleep was out of the question. He walked outside the town to the top of a bluff which overlooked it to the north, and there he sat smoking for hours. At first he lived over again the delight of their long talk together, but by and bye he began to think of the future, and his mood changed. She was going to-morrow, while he was bound by contract to Tam Sander-son's brother to remain here for at least two months. What might not happen in two months? There were hundreds of men in New Mexico who would go wild, as he had done, at the sight of her face. Could he speak before they parted? For a moment, so audacious was this man, and so strong his passion, that he hesitated while his eyes glowed and his breath came thick and short; but common sense came to the rescue and he sneered bitterly at

the impulse and frightened it away. Then another fear tortured him. Nat Worsley, that quiet, grim little sheep-man, was he not a rival, and if so could there be a more dangerous one? True, this evening he had not obtruded himself in the least, and Bel had talked as if he did not exist. But he was a man of great self-control, and, besides, could afford to bide his time. While Bel—after all, might she not be amusing herself with Jefferson Collingwood?

Such thoughts as these were ill companions at night for a man with overwrought nerves, and when Jeff determined to torment himself no more, and retired to bed, his dreams were worse than his reflections, and he rose at dawn haggard and weary.

The hotel was all astir, for the coach started early. Jeff found the girls in the porch standing with Nat to watch the sun rise. They greeted him cordially, but Jeff fancied that there was a suggestion of reserve in Bel's manner, and he noticed that she addressed herself to Nat immediately afterwards rather pointedly, and continued to talk to him until breakfast was ready, never even looking in Jeff's direction.

Never had a strong and hearty young man so little appetite as Jeff that morning. The bread

seemed to choke him, the beefsteak to be made of wood. It would have been altogether a very silent meal, for a reflection of his mood seemed to oppress the rest, had not Mr. Calderon joined them and enlivened them by giving harrowing accounts of the primitive arrangements of sheep-ranches in general and Mr. Dan Shelford's in particular, and rousing Bel's indignation by prophesying that she would not endure it for a week.

Breakfast over, the girls retired to finish their packing, while the young men, accompanied by the sheriff, strolled round to see the horses of the stage put in. Up to the moment of the girls' departure Mr. Calderon chatted and joked in the most cheerful manner. But when they left his face became grave, and he was as silent as Nat himself.

The horses were hitched, the coach ready, and John Forster, shortest and grumpiest of stage-drivers, snapped out: "Them as want to go climb in — I wait for none."

This was a gentle hint to the girls, who were taking messages from the sheriff for their father.

He shook hands with both of them.

"Good-bye, good-bye, little gells — for little you are to me — remember what I say now. Where you're

going, folk is one thing or the other. Either they will go through fire for you, or they are worse than snakes. The prairie is a very nice place to walk or ride in if you have a good friend at your side, but it has queer ways if gells goes alone. Don't forget that. Good-bye and bless ye both. You Nat, *take care of them*. Adios — adios !”

He shook hands again, having done so a most unnecessary number of times already. Forster's red face was nearly purple with impatience. This made the leave-taking with Jeff very short. He had several things which he intended to say, one of which had been to announce his intention of paying a visit to Chico Springs in the winter. But when the moment came he was so nervous that he could not say anything at all, and only gave Bel's hand a squeeze which made it ache for some hours afterwards, and muttered a gruff farewell.

Then the coach started with a jerk and rattle and departed in a cloud of dust.

A sense of irritation, a stupid, helpless misery descended upon Jeff as the stage disappeared. It was over ! These people, known only for two days, were now gone to a far-off country, never to cross his path again, though one had become so dear to him.

What a fool he had been! She care? It was a feverish dream. He felt glad that he had not offered to go and see them. Why should they care ever to see him again? He would get to work and drive the whole thing out of his mind.

Jeff was a man of action. He seldom thought about anything more than once before he did it. In half an hour after the coach departed he was inspecting a bunch of horses for sale; and before noon had made his purchase and was at the ranche of Tam's brother, ready to start on the round-up at an hour's notice. He found Tam's brother in trouble. One of his children had just fallen ill. The sickness did not appear to be very serious, but there had been fever about that summer and as illness of any kind is always dreaded in proportion to the rarity of its occurrence, a doctor was needed. Jeff, whose condition of mind just then was one of intense restlessness, offered to drive back to Las Animas, and as he was the best whip on the ranche, his offer was eagerly accepted. Arriving again at Las Animas he found that the doctor was out, but had left word that he would be back in half an hour. Jeff hitched his horse to a post, and waited. It was a hot afternoon and he strolled into the bar of the hotel for a drink. The sheriff was

there, and, rather to Jeff's surprise, shook hands with warmth.

"I had you in my mind, young man, that precise moment. Strange you should be here. What will you take? My drink."

Jeff took lager beer, the sheriff something stronger. They did not stay long. The restlessness Jeff felt so strongly seemed to torment the sheriff also, and they walked up and down before the doctor's house.

For a time they paced in silence, but at a turn of the sidewalk their eyes met, and each saw a look in the other's face which struck him as peculiar.

The sheriff was the first to speak. He accompanied his words by an action very rare with him — laying his hand on the young man's shoulder and calling him by his Christian name.

"What's on your mind, Jefferson?"

At any other time, and from any other man, Jeff would have keenly resented such a question. But there was a gnawing hunger for sympathy in his heart, and in the touch of the old man's hand, and in the tone of his voice there was a gentleness, almost tenderness, which soothed Jeff's sore spirit. He hung his head and turned his face away.

“Not much that is worth telling. I am a fool, like many more.”

He stopped and cleared his throat.

“And why?”

Jeff straightened himself, and looked his questioner in the face. His mouth was hard and his words bitter, but they were belied by a pitiful sadness in the eyes.

“Some one has gone South to-day, whom I shall never see again, and my heart has gone with her. Now you have it all.”

He turned away when he had finished speaking, and made as though he were going back to the hotel. But the sheriff's grasp on his shoulder tightened, and they walked on in silence again for a space. The only reply made by Calderon to Jeff's confession was a sigh of sympathy, but it was better than many words. At last the old man began in a low, earnest tone.

“I guessed this, Jefferson. It came to me as early as yesterday evening. I thought to myself, thinks I—Dave Calderon, you are a hard old case. It's five-and-thirty years since your heart beat for a woman—yet you ain't too old nor too blind nor too deaf to mistake the marks of that feeling. There's a fire in his eyes—I was thinking of you—there's a tone in

his voice when he speaks to that little girl, which goes straight to your heart, tough as you are, as the ball of a Colt's sixshooter. Those were my ideas, Jefferson, last night. And then I watched you. Don't rar' and get mad with the old man for spyin'. I've that to say before I'm through which will explain all. I say I watched you. You didn't go to bed. You prowled off to think, and you didn't turn in till past midnight. I timed it by my watch. Then, this morning. She talked to the sheep-man and your face was like a lamp with the light snuffed out. Poor lad, your road is rough. I ain't too old to forget that either, remember."

He paused and gave another sympathetic sigh, and they took a turn of the sidewalk again. Then he went on in a different tone, watching Jeff closely out of the corner of his eyes.

"But the world's big. And she — good as she is — ain't the first woman you've seen in your life, and may be not the last. How's that?"

Jeff's only reply to this was to withdraw his shoulder somewhat sharply from the hand laid upon it.

"I can't speak from experience."

The sheriff clapped his hand where it had been, more firmly than before.

“Don’t fling away now. I was but trying ye. Not but what I hope you’ll be free-hearted before long. I know you ain’t now, and don’t want to be. You ain’t that kind of man. And now I’m coming to business. For I ain’t wasting your time here, nor my own, though it looks like it. Do you know the country they”—with a wave of his hand to the south—“are bound for? Calumet County, New Mexico?”

“Not at all.”

“Well then, I’ll tell ye—for I do know it, being sheriff there five years, up to a matter of three months ago. Jefferson Collingwood, it’s just —” Here the good sheriff uttered that word of four letters which men of his class invariably use when under pressure of great excitement.

“If Dan Shelford—I have known him twenty years—were not the cussedest, obstinatest old prairie badger as ever grew sheep, he’d have dug his own grave and shot himself into it before he ever sent for those daughters of his. Calumet County, New Mexico, once one of the quietest settlements on the eastern slope of the Rockies, is at this present speaking the most God-forsaken place we have in the Union. Times will mend—they always do in a

free country—but they'll mend only in one way—by the ranchemen rising and quietly cleaning out the towns, or one or two of them, and hanging a few score of the cursed dead-beats and scum of the world they've allowed to collect there. You know a bit, perhaps, what such places are. No man's life is worth a shake when he's honest, and no woman is safe at all unless she can kill at sight and likes doing it. Or unless"—here the sheriff spoke slowly and with emphasis—"she's well guarded by those who know how to fight.

"Now all this is bad enough, but there's more to come. In this county of Calumet, sheep-men and cattle-men have pretty near come to blows. That is, they would have if the sheep-men were not too weak to do any fighting. As it is they are moving out. But Dan Shelford is not one of these. I know the man, and I'll bet my best horse against a yellow dog that he'll stick on his ranche like a balky mule, and let them blow his old shanty into the air before he will move an inch. And the worst of it all is that the cattle-men, curse them,—you're one, I suppose—but I can't help facts—the cattle-men of Calumet are so bitter that they allow the low-down crowds from the towns to make hay of sheep-men.

Of course this knocks away any kind of show from the sheep-men for standing straight at all, and if it weren't for Ezekiel Mixer, storekeeper of the station, Chico Springs, old Dan would have been roasted out before now. When his daughters get there, and the rowdies get to hear of it, I would not guarantee anything."

The sheriff paused here, and glanced sharply at his companion. Jeff did not speak, but his lips were pressed tightly together, and his brows knit, as if he were turning over some difficult problem in his mind. Dave Calderon was quite satisfied with the effect his words had produced.

"That's the position," he went on, "and the worst side of it. The other side is — Nat Worsley, who is gone to Calumet to stay, if I know anything of men, and who'll do all that lies in him to keep things even, and the man I spoke of, Zeke Mixer — a kind of card the cattle-men and the bull-whackers know mighty little about — and that's all. Two men, and the few they can pick up, against what you may call an army, and those two little daisies to be defended agin it. It's enough to touch the heart of a bear, and old Dan ought to have ten years in the Penitentiary — that's my opinion."

Another pause, and for some minutes no sound but the tramp of the two men on the sidewalk ; then at last Jeff spoke, and the old sheriff held his breath.

“The way you put it — there will be danger, danger every day for — for those two girls, while they are in New Mexico. Is that so?”

“You’ve struck it. That is so.”

“And,” — speaking very slowly — “if I gave up my contract and went down, do you think things would be safer for them?”

“I do.”

“But I am not a sheep-man.”

“You are square and honest, and if you spoke truth a while back, there don’t live a man who’ll touch those girls, while you have a finger left to press a trigger. That’s why I spoke. But don’t mistake me — this is a free country, and no man need step into fire for the asking. Take it or leave it; I’d not blame you if you held back.”

“I — take it, then.”

Calderon stopped short in his tramp and looked hard at Jeff for nearly a minute without speaking. Then he laid both his hands upon his shoulders.

“Lad, I must be fair, and put all down. If aught I’ve said has made you think ‘I’ll go, for mebbe

she'll turn to me after all,'—if that's what moves ye, put the whole idea away. It ain't fair, neither for you nor for her. I ain't meant that. Of course it isn't for any one to speak of other folks' business, and that little Comanche-Nat, as they call him, is close as he kin stick. But, he saved her from the Arapahoes, and for four weeks afterwards she has had him to talk to and him only, all day long. But there's more than that. It's hard to tell ye, and, God forgive me, I didn't mean to tell ye because I wanted you to go South so bad, and feared it would put you off. But I will tell you now.

“Between the room I slept in last night and the breakfast-room, there's but a thin slab of wood. I heard voices this morning, and though it's my business to hear all I can and say naught, I'll repeat to you the words that came, for it's life and death, maybe.

“One voice says—Maizie's:—

“‘He thought a great deal of it. You scarcely spoke to Nat, and Mr. Collingwood never took his eyes from your face all the evening.’

“‘Nonsense,’ said Bel very quick, ‘why, we have only spoken to one another about twice. I don't know him a bit. How could he think I preferred

his society to Nat's. Nat was talking to Mr. Calderon. I am sure you are mistaken.'

"‘I'm telling you of what I saw,’ rejoins Maizie in that firm little voice of hers. ‘If you feel so about him you *must* be different when he comes in the morning, or you may do a great wrong. He's a good man.’

"Just then the door opened somewhere and there was no more of it. Now — I have told you all."

Jeff took one of the sheriff's hands and pressed it.

"Thank you. It's — it's all right. I had an idea when I saw her this morning it was all over; now I know. I am nothing to her, — nothing at all."

"And what will you do?"

"Go South — to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII.

NAT'S REWARD.

How far Bel was conscious of the impression she had made upon Jeff Collingwood it is not easy to say — she hardly knew herself. But all that day she was unusually silent and thoughtful, and had not recovered her usual cheerfulness by the time she reached Chico Springs two weeks later.

There was more than one reason for this. From the day they crossed "the divide" and entered upon the desolate scenery of New Mexico, — with its ill-shaped, flat-topped mountains, and monotonous billow-like, rolling prairie land, interspersed with grey tracts of sage brush and patches of black grassless soil seamed with white deposits of alkali, as dead and bare as a desert of Africa, — the girls noticed that Nat's manner and bearing changed, and he became as reserved and taciturn as on the first day of their acquaintance, two months ago.

This change had not come all at once, and when they compared notes the night before the last day of their journey, they found that they entirely disagreed as to the time when it began. Bel declared that Nat had never been the same since Maizie had refused to ride on the top of the coach the day the road agents appeared, while Maizie was positive that she had not noticed any depression in Nat's spirits until they left Las Animas. At breakfast on the last morning they tried hard to bring him round. But in vain. He answered their questions gently, and was more than usually attentive to their comfort; but accompanying every word and action was an indefinable something in tone and bearing which conveyed to Maizie's mind, at least, a clear intimation that as soon as Chico Springs was reached, and they were under their father's care, he would leave them. But Bel, when Maizie prophesied this, would not listen.

"Of course he will come to the ranche, and stay awhile," she said. "Father will insist upon it. Perhaps he feels nervous at what people may say, for you know how he hates being thanked for anything. That is it, depend upon it. We must give father a hint, somehow, not to say too much at first. But how awkward that this has come now. Do you see that

he has put on his horrid old clothes this morning? I do want to tell him that he should dress nicely to-day. But I daren't. Don't you think you could, Maizie, dear?"

But Maizie refused, with what Bel thought unnecessary emphasis, and they then mounted to their places on the coach and drove away.

Chico Springs Station, a straggling group of log and adobe houses, came in sight at noon, and with a great clatter of wheels and cracking of whip, the stage crossed a sweep of sandy waste, rattled over a wooden bridge which spanned the Chapparal River—a muddy rivulet with high banks—and at a brisk canter dashed into the station, and pulled up before its principal building, Simpson's saloon.

Simpson's saloon, or "Simpson's,"—as the natives of the soil called it,—was a structure of three stories. The lowest was dug out of the ground, and used for kitchen and larder; the next, of adobe, was painted black with yellow stripes; the next, of frame, a dirty white; while, covering the whole, was a shingle roof—a costly luxury in those days, and which the proud possessor had coloured blue, painting his name across it in the largest of gold letters. As a monstrosity

of ugliness Simpson's was worth going many miles to see ; but Chico Springs was proud of it.

In common with most houses of its class, Simpson's received its visitors on the second floor by a long flight of steps, at the top of which a "porch," or covered balcony, was built, where the greater part of the inhabitants of the station lounged when the day was warm.

On this balcony, when the coach rattled up, stood a man who examined the vehicle with evident interest, nodding his head and grunting when he saw the faces of the passengers. This was Mr. Dan Shelford. He was a person of small stature and shrunken appearance ; his clothes, of brown canvas, were new and much too big for him. His hat, very broad in the brim, was pulled over his eyes ; and those on the coach could only see the tip of a sharp nose, a long chin, and thin, clean-shaven lips, which habitually exposed rather prominent front teeth with a nervous contraction like a fixed smile. His face was wrinkled and weather-beaten, and Nat thought as hard as a flint. But Nat was more severe than he need have been. The hardness vanished when Mr. Shelford trotted down the saloon steps ; and Latham Moore, the driver of the mail, and a truthful man, was heard

afterwards to declare that he saw a tear on the old man's cheek when his daughters kissed him, and not even the withering scorn and incredulity of all Shelford's most intimate friends could drive this idea out of Latham's head. Be this as it may, it is certain that Dan Shelford showed as much emotion as he was capable of, though we are bound to admit that it was very soon over, and the tone in which he spoke immediately afterwards was as harsh and matter of fact as if his children had been away ten days instead of ten years.

"So — ye're come. It is good to see you, but I'd no notion it would have cost so much. Who's this?"

He had spied Nat, who, having alighted on the other side of the coach to be out of the way, now appeared with the girls' trunk on his shoulder.

"Nat Worsley, father," said Maizie, with a brightness in her eyes and a colour in her face that made her almost beautiful for the moment, "the friend who saved our lives."

"I remember. How d'ye do, Mr. Worsley? Glad to make your acquaintance. You and me will have a word before we get away from town. See, little gells, guess you had better trot over to Mixer's store

— you remember Ezekiel Mixer who gave you candy in the old times? Well, he reckons he has some now. There he stands, waiting. Go to him while we put your trunk in the wagon.”

All this was spoken in the tone of one who always had his own way and must have it now. The girls obeyed instinctively, and were soon absorbed in contemplation of the Mixer family.

Nat, with a slight contraction of the lips, followed Dan Shelford in another direction, and presently dumped his burden into a lumber wagon drawn by two fat mules.

“Wa'al, Mr. Worsley,” said the little man, looking at his companion out of the corner of his eyes like a magpie about to peck. “I guess now you'll not mind a drink. Come to the saloon.”

They went thither, Nat, so far, not having spoken a word. His silence, however, did not seem to embarrass Mr. Shelford in the least.

Drinks were ordered, tasted, and then Dan, eyeing Nat under his hat brim more like a magpie than ever, began to ask questions sharply.

“Come to Chico Springs to stay, I presume, have ye?”

“No, sir.”

"No? where is your location?"

There was something in the way this was said that made Nat, though not naturally a quick-tempered man, tingle all over. His face at once became the quintessence of impenetrability.

"Where sheep pay best."

"And where's that?"

"You might tell me, perhaps."

Dan cast a sharp look at the speaker, and shook his head. "That's not my business, young man. But I am concerned to know where your ranche lies—if you have one—so's I may tell how far you brought my gells. That's my meaning."

"I have no ranche now."

"Sold out?"

"Yes."

Dan Shelford looked suspicious.

"What price?"

"More than I expected, but not more than I deserved."

The old stockman looked at Nat sharply again, but Nat's face might, as far as expression went, be compared to a piece of wood. Mr. Shelford drummed his fingers on the counter, and, for the first time, looked uncomfortable. He sipped his liquor and

choked ; took another sip to recover himself, cleared his throat and delivered his soul in a breath.

“Nat Worsley, you took my daughters out of the Arapahoe camp, boarded ’em as well as you could, and brought them safe to Seckersburg, and now you have seen them through to me. This has cost you trouble and time, and for good work a man should get fair pay. I’m poor —leastways, not rich. But if you will set down your price on paper, I’ll put it before my girl Maizie, who has a head for figures and knows the circumstances. And if what she says is reasonable, I’ll pay you before I leave town to-day.”

If a thunderbolt had fallen through the shingle roof of Simpson’s and descended on Nat’s head, it could not have been a greater shock to his system than Mr. Shelford’s proposal. All the experience of men he had gathered in his wandering life had not prepared him for this. It was well that the glassware of Simpson’s was strong, or the tumbler in Nat’s hand would have been crushed into small pieces. He managed to set it down somehow, and then, without answering, bundled himself into the open air. Dan Shelford followed him, peering up at his face, eager and suspicious.

Opposite to the saloon, with only a broad road

between, was Mixer's store, and Nat, looking across, saw Maizie in the porch, shading her eyes with her hand as if waiting for some one. A sudden idea struck Nat, and the face which Dan Shelford tried to read became harder than before.

"The notion of payment, sir," Nat said slowly, "is queer. Is it your own?"

Dan winced. He was anxious to stand well with Nat, to whom he was genuinely grateful; and to his mind payment in money was the only kind of gratitude worthy of the name, yet Dan was a strictly truthful man.

"Well, it was—and it was not," he stammered. "I had it in my mind from the time that cowboy brought the first letters from my gells. But it got clenched in when Maizie's note came from Seckersburg. So I cannot say the idee were all my own. Other folk kind of saw it more strongly than me, but it was in my head all the time. Now, friend, say—what price?"

It was a long time before Nat answered, and then his reply was not at all what Dan expected. He stood for some minutes grasping the railing of the balcony with hands which trembled strangely, his face rigid and colourless as if he were in great pain.

Meanwhile, within the store Bel was recounting to Mr. Mixer the episode in the Arapahoe camp. While she talked, she caressed Shep, who loved her, next to his master, more than any person in the world, and had followed her into the store. In the middle of the story, which Bel told exceedingly well, Shep became uneasy. Bel laughed.

“Nat is not far off. I must hurry.”

But no Nat came. Suddenly Shep barked, leapt free from Bel’s caressing hand, and stood in the middle of the room on tiptoe. Bel stopped speaking, and every one looked at the dog. Now, faintly, but heard by all, came a long, peculiar whistle. The next moment the window was darkened, there was a fearful crash, and Shep disappeared, carrying the whole of a pane of plate glass with him.

With an exclamation of astonishment both Maizie and Bel made a quick movement towards the door. It was opened before they reached it, and their father came in alone. He looked flushed and uncomfortable, but in his eyes there was a sort of subdued twinkle of relief and satisfaction.

“Where’s Nat?” Bel cried, Maizie saying nothing.

Mr. Shelford coughed, and tried to be jocose. “Where he feels like being, my dears, I s’pose.

He's all right. At present speaking I reckon he's a mile or more on the road to Santa Fé. What's the matter? It ain't my fault. You don't think I sent him away? He just bolted. No man can say why. I did the best I could do,—asked him to name his price for all he had done for you."

The girls looked at him in unutterable dismay.

"You offered him money," said Maizie with whitening lips. "Our friend—our brother almost—father!"

Mr. Shelford tried to look virtuously indignant.

"Wa—all—it was your own letters that gave me the idea."

"You told him that?"

Maizie spoke so sharply that Dan jumped. But he tried to brave it out.

"I did so—I was bound to, for he asked me."

"What did he say then?"

Maizie's eyes were dangerous now.

"I can't well remember. Not much. Something about having made a mistake, and been on a wrong track; and then he went off. He looked that ugly! I *never* saw an uglier pair of eyes. I was glad when he did go. But there ain't anything to argue about. He's gone and there's an end. I came to say it's

time to go. You get ready, gells, while I hitch up. We have a good few miles to drive."

These last words Mr. Shelford uttered very rapidly — beating a retreat before reply was possible. He was, in truth, glad to escape. Perhaps it was well he was able to do so.

CHAPTER IX.

THUNDER IN THE AIR.

THE drive from Chico Springs to Shelford's ranche, a matter of ten miles, was one of the most uncomfortable hours Dan Shelford ever spent in his life. He had been really eager to see his daughters, and had made many sacrifices for them; while they, on their part, had written long letters full of affectionate anticipation, which had warmed and softened the old man's heart in a manner no one but the Ezekiel Mixer, before mentioned, would have conceived possible. And now, instead of the two blithe girls Dan had dreamt of, recognising the old landmarks and asking questions about old friends, — cheering the dull country-side with their merry voices and high spirits, — there were two silent young women who seated themselves in the wagon as though it were a prison-van, gazed down the road to Santa Fé with their hearts in their eyes, and preserved towards

himself, their own father, a demeanour of grave reproach, if not of open offence.

But when at length the old home came in sight, the girls began to take some interest in their surroundings. Alas! all was changed. The house which, when they last saw it, seemed to them a palace fit for the President, was now only a small, mean-looking log-hut, a spot of dark brown on a great expanse of prairie — bare as a billiard-table from the tread of thousands of sheep, and unrelieved by a tree or bush of any kind.

The greatest shock of all, however, came when they arrived there. A condition of things then became apparent truly appalling to a woman's eye. Rubbish and litter of the most unsightly description was strewn in every direction. Here were some scores of empty tomato tins, there an astonishing variety of old kettles and two bottomless coffee-pots; while everywhere were bones, principally of sheep, scattered as thickly as pebbles on the seashore.

In ranches where several men "batch" together, it is the custom to throw into space everything that is not wanted, and convert the surrounding prairie into a sort of universal dust-bin — with very unpleasant results. To the girls the whole place looked

more fit for rats and pigs to dwell in than human beings, and Bel, who was in a very irritable and touchy state of mind, had it on the tip of her tongue to say so, if given the opportunity. A glance at the door and porch, however, was more reassuring. These were swept and clean, and as the wagon drew up, a woman with a fresh, kindly face bustled out and waved her apron with a cheery welcome.

This was Mrs. Ezekiel Mixer, to whom, as the girls soon discovered, they owed more than she would ever allow them to thank her for.

We have said that Dan Shelford meant well. His intentions of "fixin' up" for his "gells" were excellent as far as they went, but then they did not go far. It was lucky that he had to come to the Mixers to buy the "few duds" which in his opinion girls would need. Still more fortunate was it that when he was ordering two quilts, two pairs of sheets, two straw mattresses and a few other articles, all of the cheapest and coarsest kind, that Mrs. Mixer grasped the situation.

That good woman, one of the most courageous and resolute souls in the United States, no sooner did so than she left her work — even allowing her

bread to burn—to question Dan closely about the whole business. His replies made her shudder.

Now, it was a serious thing for any one, more especially for any man, to make Mrs. Mixer shudder. Sooner or later he paid dearly for the achievement. In Dan's case, Mrs. Mixer announced in her blindest tones that what he said was very interesting, and if he had no objection she would be pleased to visit his ranche and give him her opinion. It was now Dan's turn to shudder. But he was helpless. The very next day Mrs. Mixer came for a few hours and looked round. The day after she came again with a wagon full of things, including a bed for herself, and for a week Dan did nothing but draw water, cut firewood, burn mouldy household effects, and cart new furniture from Chico Springs under orders! The result was that the internal arrangements of the ranche were made fairly habitable. The condition of things outside Mrs. Mixer, as a frontierswoman, considered an unimportant detail.

A comely woman she was. Five and thirty years old, fresh coloured as a girl of twenty, tall as a man, with broad shoulders and a deep voice.

As the wagon stopped she grasped the girls by

the hands, and swung them to the ground as if they had been babies, talking all the time.

“Welcome, welcome to you both. Which is Maizie and which Bel? Ah, I see without telling. Well, dears, I have had time to peak things a bit, and make the old shanty some better than it was, but there’s heaps wants doing. Now, friend Dan,” turning sharply round, and altering her tone, “quick with your team. Dinner only wants dishing up. Don’t forget what I told you about the mare’s back. And tell José if he don’t dress more respectable, now, you’ll look for a herder who do. And—mind you ask Miguel if he scarified that snake-bitten ewe this morning, and—but that will do at present. Hurry up, I say, and get yourself washed. These travellers will be hungry.”

When the girls had fairly turned their backs upon the rubbish and looked round the interior of Sheldford’s ranche, they felt comforted. The furniture and fittings were of the homeliest description, but cleanliness, tidiness, and housewifely completeness reigned here.

Mrs. Mixer, meanwhile, after showing the girls their room, “dished up,” and talked all the time as fast as her tongue could move.

“You will have times, girls, queer times. I dunno whether you come with ideas of getting fun and frolics,” here she looked at Bel, “and gaddin’ round ’scursioning and buggy-riding with the boys. If so, take my word, you’d better not unpack, but just naterally go back East by the next stage. But if you’ve come to see that the old man lives a decent life instead of pigging all his days like a Mexican, and you mean to *work*, then I can talk to ye. What do you know already? Cooking? Ah, ha! — Miss Bel tosses her head a little bit. I’d better climb down and take a back seat, then. But, remember, we don’t have stores round the corner, nor neighbours next door, nor a doctor over the way. Nor do we get helps, who’ll flop and scrub all they’re worth while we play the pianny and crimp our hair. Not for any price that your dad is likely to offer will you get any kind of help better than a Mexican boy who will steal more than he’ll save. So, work you will have, young ladies—hard work. But, mind one thing—make the men work all you know! Whether he is a visitor or a Mexican, or your father himself, never let a man on the ranche have a chance even to light a pipe while a chore is left undone. Out West here, a great part of a woman’s comfort

depends in the way she makes her men fly round. There — supper's on the table, and your father only just come in to clean himself. If that ain't like a man! While he's in the kitchen, come into the sleeping-room I've fixed up for myself, and look at a present I have for you."

Mrs. Mixer now spoke in a lower tone and accompanied her words by several nods and winks. The girls followed her, smiling, into a bare little room, quite unfurnished except for a few articles of rough furniture and a roll of blankets and three sheepskins—which Mrs. Mixer proudly exhibited as her "beddin"¹—and a wooden box. Out of this box Mrs. Mixer took a leather case. She was now very grave and spoke in impressive tones.

"Don't be frightened, dears, by what I bring out. This air will not agree with your constitutions if things scare you easily. A while ago you was young ladies living in the East. I remember your good aunt, who brought you up since your mother's death. She would have everything just so. And her husband had money, and your lives have been

¹ In 1873 women of Mrs. Mixer's type liked to show that they could live in frontier simplicity; it was not usual, otherwise, even then, for ladies to have such primitive sleeping accommodation.

easy and tender and quiet. They will hardly be so now. Those pretty white hands must grow hard and strong. Until then — remember, never go out alone on horseback or a-foot with any living man, unless my husband, who *knows*, says it is all square. And now see here what I have for ye — to make you strong. There's my present. They are the best Zeke ever sells."

She opened the case and handed each girl a revolver.

At this moment Dan, washed and in want of supper, found his way into the room.

"Hello — shooting-irons! Take care, Bel, my daughter! There — there — keep the muzzle to the ground. Is this safe, Mrs. Mixer, do you think? I never could abide pistols. Such unlikely things, too, for gells — don't you think?"

At this hint, Mrs. Mixer's eyes resumed an expression which Dan did not like.

"There's truth in what you say, Dan Shelford. And where men can protect the women of their family, pistols ain't for girls. But where they cannot, it is different. If one of these girls was to say, 'Shall I be safe living in this lonely ranche, my father away a great part of his time, *without* fire-

arms?' I should answer, no, and I should like — I would very much like — to hear any man contradict me, especially the man who is most responsible."

But Dan had already retired to the kitchen. Mrs. Mixer turned to the girls.

"My dears, tell me what you think yourselves."

They were talking to one another and did not hear her, and Mrs. Mixer's keen eyes saw a suspicion of tears in Maizie's eyes, as Bel said: —

"Why, it is exactly the same pattern and size of the one he gave you, Maizie. How curious! Is yours in the trunk?"

"I always carry it. He made me promise."

And then, to Mrs. Mixer's unbounded astonishment, Maizie produced from a pocket in her dress a revolver larger than the one in her hand.

"Can you use that, my dear?"

"A little."

"A little, indeed," struck in Bel. "Mrs. Mixer, she is a splendid shot. Nat, who can shoot better than any man I ever heard of, taught her most carefully. I always shut my eyes just before it goes off—I cannot help it, and I suppose that rather spoils my aim—but Maizie never shuts her eyes."

"Well, I'm sure," exclaimed Mrs. Mixer, smiling,

“if I don’t have to climb down now ! I forgot what frontierswomen you were — trained by experienced hands. Well, let’s find your father, and have supper. I am going to be here a little spell to see you settled in. Maizie shall teach *me* to shoot. My word !”

Mrs. Mixer stayed two weeks. Her husband came down before the end of the first week, and threatened to return in twenty-four hours with a lasso, and take her home by force ; but she told him she would not be cheated out of a holiday, after being married to him five years. And then they had a long talk together, after which he went home without further protest. That evening Mrs. Mixer caught Dan Shelford over his pipe after supper, and had an interview with closed doors, which the girls thought would never end. The next day she announced to the girls that it was settled that the ranche was not a safe place for them to live in, that their father had given his consent to their going to stay at Chico Springs for the next few months, until the country was in a better state — and that to Chico Springs they would return with her forthwith.

Mrs. Mixer was a clever woman, with a kind heart and the best intentions. But for all that she made

mistakes sometimes, and it was not long before she discovered that she had made one now. Bel, it was true, said she would go if her father really wished it, but Maizie met the proposal with a quiet but determined negative.

“I came out to be with father,” she said simply. “I knew from the first that life would be different from St. Louis. And I have guessed lately that we might be in danger. You tell me, dear Mrs. Mixer, no more than this. It is very kind of you to ask us to come to you and I am very glad Bel is going, but I shall not leave father. I am quite prepared to take the risk—I intend to take it, thank you. I am quite sure father wants me.”

“And I will stay with her,” cried Bel, with heightened colour; “Maizie shall not be here alone—that I am quite determined about.”

Mrs. Mixer, however, was not to be easily beaten. She went all over the ground again, and with Maizie’s assistance reduced Bel to submission; but she could do no more, and after talking until she nearly lost her voice, and making Dan’s life a misery to him, she departed with Bel, and left Maizie to follow her own devices.

The first few days after Mrs. Mixer’s departure were

a time of great restfulness to Maizie, and she slept better than she had done for weeks. Now, at last, in the sunny September afternoons when her household work was done, she could quietly think out the hopes and disappointments of which her life had been rather full lately, examine them impartially, and understand their true meaning without feeling that Mrs. Mixer's eyes were always watching her, and without being constantly interrupted by that good woman's busy tongue.

At times she was restless, and caught herself wondering whether Nat would not walk in some day with Shep at his heels, as if nothing had happened. It was impossible to believe that she would never see him again. Now that he was not with her, all that his devotion and care really meant seemed to become clear. He was in love with Bel, — that Maizie never doubted for an instant, — and loved her with a depth and force to which they had both been blind until it was too late. How easy, now, to understand that reticence and reserve of his on those last days. In his humility and in his pride he was afraid lest he should seem to make some claim upon Bel by his great services. Therefore as they drew nearer to their friends, so he became more

nervous and diffident, and when as a culminating point their father so bitterly misunderstood him by offering money, he fled altogether.

Poor Nat, and poor Bel. But here Maizie stopped, and fell into a different train of thought. She loved her sister dearly. Yet somehow, of late, she had become less blind to certain faults or weaknesses of character, of which before they left St. Louis she had not been conscious. Did Bel love Nat? She liked him; she was, in a way, fond of him—but love, such as Nat craved for, did the child know what it meant? This doubt saddened Maizie. Nat would come back—he could not help it. Probably he would come to her, Maizie, as a sister, and it would rest with her to bring about a meeting with Bel at the right time and in the right way. This could be done easily: but if Bel did not care—

Two weeks went by, uneventful weeks for Maizie. No one came to disturb her, and none of the dangers at which Mrs. Mixer had darkly hinted ever showed themselves at all. All day long the girl was alone except at meals, and when her father was with her there was not much said. Yet she had the satisfaction of seeing that he looked better and more cheerful, eat his food with a better appetite, and, at

times, talked of old days and of his business, as if it were a relief to have her sympathy and companionship.

But this quiet time was not to last much longer. One day, when Maizie was sweeping out the kitchen in the middle of the morning, she heard a soft foot-step, and José, her father's foreman herder, enquired for the Señor with a certain abruptness she did not quite like. He went away immediately with the politest of bows when she told him the time Dan was to come home, but all day long she felt nervous and uncomfortable, and was more relieved than she would have avowed to any one when the old wagon rattled in at last. She noticed that her father fumed and muttered to himself when he heard of José's visit. They had supper as usual, but before the things were cleared away a sharp tap came at the door, and all the Mexicans, José at their head, trooped into the room and stood twirling their hats, like school-boys who had broken rules. A fine stalwart set they were—a family of brothers.

The man least embarrassed was José himself. He looked his master straight in the face, and spoke out boldly.

“Señor, we bring bad news. We are all here—

Maximo from his camp in the Mesa Grande—Juan from Rio Salvadore, and me and Miguel and Ilario. If we had not come we should not be alive. Vacheros Texano, many in number, have spoken with pistols in our faces. They said, 'This country is for cattle and not sheep. Any man who herds sheep on the ranges here shall die.' Then they said they spoke from their masters, and that you knew all, and that before many days are over, you will be—"

He pulled up abruptly, glanced at Maizie, and ended his sentence by whispering something in his master's ear.

Dan did not speak for a moment. He glared at the men with so fierce an expression that they kept an apprehensive eye upon the movements of his right hand. At last he snarled out:—

"Is this all? No wonder cowboys despise you. You do not ask for pistols or rifles to kill these devils. You only run away."

The men now began to scowl in their turn, and José rejoined quickly:—

"You are a brave man, Señor. So brave that you have not even a shot-gun in your house. How then could we ask for arms? And if we did, would you

spend one dollar to save our lives? No — you would let your poor herders die like dogs. Our lives are not worth money to you, so they are of no value. Why should we fight for you? No. You must find other men. To-morrow my brothers will take the sheep out for the last time, while you go to Chico Springs and get the money that is owing for our service. It is this that I wish to tell you — we herd for you only one more day.”

He put on his hat and stalked out, followed by his brothers, who saluted Maizie in turn but took no notice of Dan.

When the door closed Maizie looked anxiously at her father. He was still frowning. Now he stamped his foot, and made use of expressions which nearly sent Maizie out of the room. Then he began to walk up and down talking half to himself, half to her.

“I shall go to Zeke Mixer. These boys shall be arrested for breaking contract, if it costs me all. It means ruin if they leave me. Nine thousand sheep — I can’t herd nine thousand, and the cowboys will scare away every Mexican I can pick up, as they have done these.”

“But, father, would they not threaten your life if you did go out?”

“Threaten? They have been at that game for months. I am not afraid of their bluster. A man does not live twenty-five years on the frontier to tremble at these young bull-whackers. Now you go to bed, child. We’ll fix things to-morrow. Zeke Mixer can do it, some way, and it’ll save herder’s wages. Not a cent will they get. The worst is to think of those sheep eating up the grass all around this range, when they might be in camp. *Curse* the white-livered greasers.”

He sank back into his chair with a groan, and when Maizie, after an interval, passed into the kitchen, she saw him crouched before the stove with haggard face, muttering incoherently to himself, and she went to bed with a heavy heart, the word “ruin” ringing in her brain.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORM BURSTS.

DAN rose so early the next morning that Maizie was inclined to suspect that he had never been to bed at all. But he was in better spirits, and drove away before sunrise in a comparatively cheerful frame of mind. He was not so cheerful when he reached Chico Springs. A fear haunted him lest he might be so early that business at the store would not have begun, in which case he would be invited to step into Mrs. Mixer's parlour, and he did not feel at all equal to facing Mrs. Mixer.

He need not have troubled himself, however. Though it was barely half-past six, the store was open and the master in his shirt sleeves was putting the finishing touches to his arrangement of goods for the day.

No one in Chico Springs had ever seen Mr. Mixer in a hurry, yet he had never been late for an appoint-

ment. No one had ever heard him laugh, yet his wit was proverbial in the county. Few had ever known him speak more than a dozen words at a time, yet he was consulted by numbers of men about their private affairs, and gave more advice than many lawyers. He was a man who heard everything and betrayed nothing; of keen business faculty; a hard worker, honest in all his dealings, and strict about payment of just debts. So much was known about him by his neighbours and acquaintances. It was also said that he was rich, far richer than his simple way of living would lead any one to suspect. Here all knowledge, and even conjecture, on the part of the good folk of Chico Springs ended. All men liked Mixer; even the rowdy elements of which Calumet County was now so full, looked upon him as an institution as firmly established as republican government, and as little concerned with their affairs. How they would have stared had they known his previous history; and if they had suspected what lay beneath his coolness and taciturnity, how religiously they would have avoided the old log store, or conspired for its destruction.

Mr. Mixer was fifty years old. His father had been a friend of John Brown's of Harper's Ferry, and

from earliest childhood Zeke was not only a staunch abolitionist by belief, but had taken active part in the protection of fugitive slaves when such work meant constant danger and public shame. In this atmosphere he was brought up; he volunteered in the beginning of the war, and fought through to the end, receiving a commission at last from the hands of General Grant.

Since the war ended Mixer had been one of the most peaceable of citizens, and so he wished to remain while he lived. But beneath the quiet surface of his orderly way of life, the embers of the fire of old days still smouldered, and the stern spirit which no danger could turn aside, and nothing but death would stay, required but a spark to rouse it again into action.

To this man, the only human being whom he trusted, Dan Shelford told the story of his woes.

“There you have it, Zeke—nine thousand sheep and not a herder to be got for fifty miles unless you can find him. For that I’ve come to you. As for the trash who are deserting me, not a red cent will they get for all their summer’s work. That will save something. I told José this morning that their con-

tracts ain't up for nine months. and if they choose to break them now their wage shall go to better men."

To this, Mixer, who had seated himself on a barrel of crackers and listened to Dan's news with half-closed eyes, replied with a grunt that was not at all sympathetic.

"Where are those better men?"

"Ah—there you come in, old friend. I want you to find them. You have never failed me yet. Once you put your finger down there's naught can stand agin you."

"Dry up."

Dan, used to this style of address, obeyed.

"Set down on that bar'l."

He did so, and nervously rubbed his knees.

Mr. Mixer looked at him for some time without speaking.

"Dan Shelford," he said at length in the tone of a judge pronouncing sentence of death—a tone he only used towards very intimate friends,—“there is only one way out for such a man as you—only one.”

"And that way, Zeke?"

"Pull up stakes at oncet, and strike a new country. East, west, or south, Kansas, Californy, or Arizona,

where you please. Only go — that is the beginning and the end of it.”

Shelford shook his head, and an expression of obstinacy came into his face which caused Zeke to give an internal chuckle.

“Is that all you have to say, Zeke?”

“Are you going?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll reason with you. You are a marked man. Cattlemen, good and bad alike, hate you. If your Mexicans had not been the best crowd I ever heard of, you would have lost hundreds of sheep before this. And now you’ve quarrelled with them. Get as many Mexicans as you please — your sheep will fall one by one, night after night. By and bye your turn will come. It would have come long ago, but that the rowdies aren’t quite boss of this country, and daren’t try *that* just yet. Don’t ask me *why* they hate you. A dozen reasons don’t soften one hard fact. Yet I will say this — when sheep-men in a dry year fence in every water-hole for fifty mile and cattle are dying of thirst, ’tain’t a good time for sheep-men to try to insure their lives. I know the water was on your ranges, but that did not keep the cattle alive. The cowboys are going to have you

out. The autumn round-ups are closed, and they have leisure to amuse themselves. The threat to your Mexicans is the first volley. All this is truth, Dan Shelford. And there is no way but one—you will have to git.”

The old sheep-man left his barrel and stood squarely before his judge and adviser. He looked smaller and meaner in stature than usual, for Mixer was fully six feet high, yet at this moment there was a solemnity in his weak voice and a dignity in his dry manner that Mixer, long as he had known him, had never seen before.

“Friend Zeke, I ain’t come here to argy, and I don’t intend to try. But you must understand me before I walk out of your store. Twenty years ago I came into Calumet County. I took up my land by right of citizenship, built my house, and with what was left kept my family. This I did without asking aid from any man, and without wronging any, or pushing one from his rights. I *worked* day out, day in—summer and winter—through bad times and good. I worked all I knew, and so I made my way to what I am now. The land was surveyed by Government; and the marks of the ranges laid down then are there still, and I have never gone beyond them.

I tell you now, — as I told the cattlemen's association three months back, — while those marks stand good I hold to the land which is my right, and I will not leave it while I live, for any man or men. I am getting old, and I am no fighter. But no threats shall drive me off; and if the shooting comes, well — I ain't lost my eyesight yet, and little as I am, p'raps I can pull a trigger spry as some. And I will *fight*, before I leave the only bit of earth I may call my own.

“But — there — I take up your time. I dunno what to be at, and it seems you don't. I'll go my ways and worry through alone. Only — when I quit Calumet County 'twill be for further than Arizona, Zeke, or Kansas, or even Californy. It will be to prospect in another world. Adios.”

He turned to go. Mixer answered nothing. His head was resting in his hand, his eyes half closed again, he seemed buried in thought. But when Dan reached the door, Mr. Mixer looked up.

“Daniel.”

Dan glanced at him doubtfully.

“Set down where you was before.”

The old man came slowly back. Mr. Mixer's eyes were open now.

“Dan’l, what does this mean? *You* fight! *You* risk body and life and limb to keep what you call your own? Are you in dead, downright earnest? By all that’s sacred in this world, old friend, there’s more for good or ill hanging to the reply you make. than any words you’ve spoken since you were a baby on your mother’s knee. Tell me again.”

The storekeeper was on his feet now, and the men gripped one another’s hands.

“You ain’t seen me before with my back agin the wall, Zeke. I’m drove there now. I say that they may kill me, but they shall never set me down.”

Mixer’s face worked with excitement, and he wrung the old man’s hand till his muscles cracked.

“Then I’ll stand by ye, Dan’l, all I’m worth. And if I’m not so young, I know more than I used to do. Now, let us count the cost. There will be money to be lost and lives. We’re but few. *They’re* many. Whenever the fighting comes, it will be with knives, so to speak, and at close hand-grips, and *our* weapons must be sharper at the point, quicker handled, and of better steel than theirs. Do you sabe? Then to business.”

Zeke was sitting at the counter now, as composedly as when Dan first told his story. There was a gleam

of humour in his eyes as he watched Dan's tightly drawn lips and anxious expression.

"Dan'l, your boys must stay and fight. I'll sell — no, I'll *lend* — you six repeating rifles, new pattern, centre fire, with same number of Colt's army pistols and knives — taken from a lot I picked up the other day and laid by. The knives are English steel and worth their weight in silver. What's the matter now, — the expense? Didn't I say they should be a *loan*?"

Dan winced.

"Tain't that, good friend. I put all that behind me, I swear I do. It's this — the boys won't fight. They think I can't shoot worth a cent. And come to that, I don't suppose I could do much beyond twenty yards with a shot-gun, let alone anything else."

"Pay a man to take hold of them for ye — a man who *can* shoot."

"Can you find him? I don't know nary one I'd trust."

Zeke remained silent for a little while, as if considering the point.

"If I did find one whom I thought fit, would you take him — and pay him?"

"I — I would, Zeke. But don't forget Maizie."

“Well, then, I do know such a one. But mind, the work is tough, and the risk immense. He must name his price.”

Dan visibly wriggled, but conquered himself.

“That’s reasonable — providing he’s the right one.”

“I know he’s that. Of course I have not spoken to him about this, and he may decline, and he’s kind of set up in some ways and not every man’s money. So let me have it straight, will you take him?”

“I will.”

“At his own figure?”

Dan bit his lip till it bled.

“If — if he’s your friend, yes.”

Mixer shook his head.

“He ain’t exactly that. But he’s my recommend, — if he’ll come into it. Will that do?”

“If you’re satisfied, I suppose — I guess it will.”

“Then I’ll find him out, and introduce him. Of course your little girl will come to us at once to stay. Take a glance at the knives. I put points on every one myself. You can nearly shave with ’em. And the rifles — see, all are cleaned and oiled. Look down that bar’l. Bright as a mirror, eh? You just remark, Dan’l friend, that well-cleaned arms is worth all when the pinch comes, for then

every shot goes straight and every knife drives home. My old dad taught me that twenty years ago, and I ain't forgotten it since."

Dan stared at his friend with dropping jaw.

"Where in the eternals, Zeke, did you take hold of this kind of learning—in the war?"

"War? Ten years before the war. But see, we're wasting time. 'Tain't me that's interesting, it's the weapons. Look at them and choose out your number while I have a word with my wife. We'll fix all up this morning."

He left the store and opened the door of a large room, half parlour, half kitchen. There, near the stove, was Mrs. Mixer, her hands kneading dough, her eyes wandering to the other side of the room, where two people were playing with a curly-headed youngster of six years old. One of these was Bel, who was assisting in the construction of a brick tower. The other, a man with broad shoulders and brown face, was watching the girl as she worked, and handing her the bricks one by one. So absorbed were these people in their occupation that Mr. Mixer's entrance was unnoticed, and Mrs. Mixer had time to give him to understand that he must not disturb them. Zeke smiled back into his

wife's eyes, and stood waiting patiently. At last he made his presence known by a low sepulchral cough. Both looked up and the man rose.

“Want me, storekeeper?”

“Wa—al, that depends! I don't wish to spile an important building contract, but I *have* a few words for you.”

There was a general laugh, and Bel found it necessary to give her handiwork close and particular examination.

“Oh, we have finished. There, Sammy, darling, that will do for the roof. Mr. Collingwood, you are dismissed, and sonny is very much obliged to you.”

She looked up at him with laughing eyes, and Mr. and Mrs. Mixer glanced at one another.

The consultation between the men was very short, and they went at once into the store. Dan was awaiting them anxiously, wondering what manner of man Zeke had picked up. The appearance of Jeff took his breath away. From Jeff's smartly embroidered shirt to his rolling gait — sure sign of a riding man — he was a cowboy *par excellence*, and for twenty years cowboys had been the bane of Dan's existence. But Dan was possessed with but one idea just now, and would not have refused the

aid of the Evil One himself, if Mixer had recommended him.

Without hesitation of any kind he agreed to engage Jeff, Mixer fixing the rate of payment. Dan's chief anxiety appeared to be that there should be no delay. All he said was : —

"You heft the chances, young man? Six Mexicans to hold to a contract they have given up, and all the country agin us?"

Jeff smiled at the storekeeper.

"I have reckoned it, and what strength I have is yours. Mr. Mixer knows."

No more words were spoken. Dan had set aside the arms he wanted, and with a parting grip of Zeke's hand hurried to his wagon. Jeff followed, after saddling his horse with a rapidity that won Dan's cordial approval, and off they started at a good thirteen miles an hour.

Was it presentiment, or was it the nervous irritation of mind natural to a peaceable man committed to a policy of war, which made Dan drive that day as most assuredly those fat mules of his had never been driven before. In three-quarters of an hour, with Jeff's horse at the lope and the mules trotting for dear life, the ranche came in sight. Down the

gentle slope of bare prairie-land the old wagon bumped, rattled, and swung. The mules were now so near home that they went faster than ever, and Jeff's lope became a hand gallop. The house was reached, and with a noise that would have awakened the Seven Sleepers, the wagon rattled round the corner, and drew up at the door where Mrs. Mixer had greeted the girls three weeks ago. Dan pulled in with an exclamation of surprise and something more upon his lips. The kitchen door and the parlour window were open, but no Maizie came to greet them. Jeff saw the old man's face turn as white as death.

"Where is my gell?" he gasped. "There's something wrong."

Jeff waited to hear no more. With what seemed to Dan a single bound, he was off his horse and on the kitchen porch. The kitchen was in confusion. On the table were plates, knives and forks and tumblers. A frying-pan was on the stove half full of meat, burnt black. Jeff cocked his revolver, and passed through to the next room, the parlour. The place was completely wrecked; the white drugget which Maizie had laid down with her own hands was strewn with broken chairs and deeply stained

with blood, even the pictures had been torn from the walls and smashed. All this Jeff took in at a glance; and then, hearing from the room beyond a faint moaning sound, he strode through the débris and opened the door. This was Maizie's room. The dainty bed, with its snowy-white coverlet, the natty book-shelf on the wall, a dressing-table with a mirror still untouched by rude hands, and a rocking-chair, proved this. But Jeff saw none of these things. Stretched by the bed, gasping for breath, lay a dying man. He was still conscious, for he moved one hand and tried to speak.

"José!" exclaimed Dan hoarsely,—he had kept close to Jeff, his face rigid and white with a horror that could not be put into words. "My God! Ask him what has happened."

"*Quiet!*" said Jeff sternly, "or leave the room. This is life or death. We'll get nothing if he's flurried."

He dropped on his knees by the Mexican, and taking a flask from his pocket poured a little brandy between his lips. After this had been repeated once or twice, the man whispered something in Spanish. Jeff placed his ear close to the feeble lips and listened.

“Desperado Vacheros — la Señorita — I saw them — too late — ten to one.”

He gasped and choked, and they feared it was his last breath. But with more brandy he rallied again.

“They take her to Amenta. You go after, *quick*.”

Again he stopped; and now from his throat came the rattle of approaching death, and his eyes closed. Jeff asked a question twice, and the lips moved slowly.

“Sandy Rathlee,” he said, and died.

A despised half-breed, poor José. Liable to steal, always willing to lie, and only really happy at the gaming-table. Yet no hero ever died a nobler death. Jeff, who had hitherto held the race in contempt, felt a sudden shame as he looked at the poor disfigured face and thought of what this Mexican had done. But it was no time for moralizing.

He sprang up, and found his arm grasped by Dan, whose face was more ghastly than the dead man's.

“Where is she? Amenta? A hole of devils! Oh Lord, oh Lord! But we'll follow. It can't be long since they left, for look how he's bled. 'Twould have killed him if he had lain more than an hour. Our beasts are better than theirs, maybe, and there's thirty miles to run. Why do you shake your head? Is it

the danger? I'll go alone. What! leave my own little one in the hands of Rathlee? You get back to Mixer's. Let me be. I will have my way."

But his hands were shaking even while he spoke, and he could hardly stand so much had the shock affected him. Jeff told him so, and half led, half dragged him to the wagon. But Dan swore he would not leave the ranche except to ride to Amenta to kill Sandy Rathlee, and struggled fiercely all the way. Jeff was at his wit's end. To ride after ten desperate men, even if Dan had been really fit for it, would be madness. The only chance lay in organising a rescue party from Chico Springs without delay, and here were precious minutes flying through the ravings of a frantic old man. At last Jeff's blood rose to boiling-point, and he was about to tie Dan into the wagon with his lasso, when he heard the patter of soft feet, and a dog fawned upon him.

"Nat's Shep, by the Lord!" he exclaimed, and the next moment he saw Nat himself walking leisurely towards the ranche.

The news was told in half a dozen words, and then Jeff saw what he never afterwards forgot. It is terrible to see any strong nature roused to fury, but the sight of a man so moved, whom you have

hitherto thought as incapable of losing his self-control as a piece of iron, is blood-curdling.

Nat said little enough. But his face stiffened, his brows contracted, the veins in his forehead stood out like cords, and an expression came into his eyes that struck even Dan, half-crazed as he was, and caused him to laugh a mirthless laugh.

"You are going to follow her. Come with me and let this coward ride back."

"Coward be hanged," cried Jeff, losing all patience. "I am not afraid of fifty Rathlee gangs, but where's the use of being shot? If I don't save the girl I want to burn the town, and I can't do that alone. Do *you* see my meaning, Nat?"

"Ride back and bring them on. You"—turning suddenly upon Dan—"go with him. This is my business. Off with you both, and leave Rathlee to me."

He glared into their faces as he spoke, as if he could have killed them for standing in his way. Then he passed his hand over his eyes with a sigh, and walked quietly into the ranche. They watched for him, wondering what he was about. In a few moments he reappeared with something in his hand—one of Maizie's hats. He knelt on the ground

and called his dog; then as Shep came sniffing at the hat, he gave some order and the dog dropped to heel. Nat threw the hat away, and began to walk slowly from the house. Presently the walk became a swinging trot. He was on the trail.

The Rathlee gang were well-mounted and well-armed. If overtaken they would fight as only such men can fight, and they had tasted blood. But in the heart of the man who followed them was that which gave him the strength of ten. Rathlee had robbed the nest. He had now to pay his price.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

It was a blistering, stifling day. There was no wind — nothing but light, and heat, and dust. Thunder was in the air, — a rare thing in September, — and by common consent every soul in Amenta city who could find an excuse for lounging in the shade, employed such energy as the heat had left in him in languidly gambling for small stakes, which the winners thereof spent immediately afterwards in drinks.

Amenta contained at this time about a hundred and fifty people, and covered a square half-mile of ground. The dwellings were of wood — smart “frame” shanties painted black and white. All were very much alike; all, except the stores, were surrounded by a fence of barbed wire, enclosing a small paddock and a tiny stable, and all looked as if they had been built in a day, and might be blown away in a night.

The stores, twenty in number, formed an apology for a street. They sported as usual very large signboards, and little else; and by the number of their broken windows, stuffed with brown paper, the rotten state of their sidewalks, and the mildewed appearance of the storekeepers, who looked as if they transacted most of their business after midnight,—which many of them did,—it appeared as if store-keeping was not a profitable way of gaining a livelihood in Amenta city.

There was only one building in the business quarter of Amenta which looked prosperous, and seemed to have been made to last. This was Nan Sheehan's saloon — known colloquially as "Nan's." It was built of adobe (Mexican brick) and was bullet-proof, fire-proof, and hard and durable as stone. Here all night long, and for a great part of the day, a large portion of the citizens of Amenta passed their time. "Nan's" and the race-course outside the town, where the horse-breeders of this part of the country arranged "trotting matches," were the principal features of Amenta city. On the course men lost their money; at Nan's they borrowed more to try their luck again.

A town where racing, gambling, and drink reigned supreme was not likely to be a dwelling-place for

honest folk, and for two years past Amenta had been a rendezvous for all the scoundrels of the surrounding country. Such places exist all over the world ; but, perhaps, in the western frontier in the United States twenty years ago, they were to be seen at their worst. Frontier life in those days was lawless enough anywhere. The men who lived quietly did so not by obeying laws or paying for a well-organised police, but by minding their own business, and giving those who had no business clearly to understand that they were not wanted, and that if they interfered with peaceable men they would receive short shrift. At times, even in the best of settlements, robbery and murder would occur. Instantly these quiet stock-breeders and keepers of stores left their business to chase and arrest the criminal ; then tried him, and within twenty-four hours of the trial killed him, without fuss or excitement, pronouncing sentence and carrying it out as methodically as they branded their calves or sheared their sheep.

In the worst settlements order of a sort was maintained by the existence of a clique or "ring" ; and the inhabitants of the surrounding country, though often suffering severely from the depredations of despera-

does and rowdies who had a stronghold to fly to, let them be with the tolerance characteristic of Americans, and thus, in certain places, a state of things prevailed almost inconceivable in a land of advanced civilization.

Amenta at this time had touched the lowest level possible even for such a sink of iniquity. The troubled state of Calumet County, New Mexico, owing to the feud of sheep and cattle men, had attracted there the worst characters from other territories, and Amenta was their headquarters. Among others came Sandy Rathlee, Kansas being an uncomfortably warm locality since his brush with Dave Calderon. Of the many types of degraded human nature common in a lawless community, Rathlee was the worst. Born in Missouri, bred in Texas, his father a mulatto, his mother a white woman of the lowest character, the boy learned nothing but what was bad. At five and twenty years of age he could neither read nor write. He had never known what gentleness meant. His fine physique and daring won the respect of men of a certain class; and an energy and quickness of brain in the man made him a leader, and, in such times as these, he became a power to be reckoned with. In an evil hour it was

suggested by a member of the Cattlemen's Association that he should be employed as a scourge to their enemies. A sum of money was paid over to him to harry and intimidate quiet men. His first act was the raid upon Shelford's ranche, and early in the afternoon he rode into town bearing Maizie as a prize for all the world to see. The audacity of the adventure excited much enthusiasm among Amenta men. The cruelty and atrocity of it was not apparent to them. Maizie had fainted from the heat and could make no appeal to the few who might have felt some compunction; and Rathlee, having lodged his booty safely, swaggered into the bar of Nan's to receive the chaff and congratulations of his friends.

This was at two o'clock, in the fiercest heat of the day. Three hours later a solitary wayfarer, followed by a footsore dog, walked slowly down the road between the line of stores. No one noticed him. No one watched to see where he went, or wondered what his business might be. If they had known it, how they would have laughed. Nat, himself, felt a cold chill of despair as he observed the number of people about, and thought of the hopelessness of setting his hand against them. He was worn out and spiritless. A run of thirty miles under an almost tropical

sun, without rest or food, had exhausted even his iron frame. Nothing but his training among the Comanches would have enabled him to do it at all. And now that it was done, what then? Where was Maizie? The track of the horsemen had been lost among others on the outskirts of the town, and here were fifty houses, more or less, in any one of which she might be. Nat sighed heavily, then with a great effort controlling his feeling of utter weariness he stood still and considered. Where could information be obtained? He looked about for an hotel and spied the saloon. To this house he bent his steps, watching the faces of the men at the bar door. This entrance Nat carefully avoided, choosing a door which seemed to belong to the kitchen at the back. Here he knocked gently. The door was opened by a tall, middle-aged woman, no other than Mistress Nan Sheehan herself, who asked his business in a suspicious tone. Nat tried to answer, but found his throat so parched with thirst that he could not speak. He saw a bucket in the corner with a dipper in it, and dumbly asked for water. Nan Sheehan looked at him with her head on one side. She was a woman without a moral scruple of any kind—a tigress in her cups. Every one feared

her—even Sandy Rathlee. And this afternoon, for various reasons, she was sulkier than usual. Yet even Nan Sheehan had a soft spot in her heart, and there was something so haggard and weary in Nat's face that the words she had intended to use died unspoken on her lips, and with a grunt she pointed to the bucket.

“Help yourself, then.”

Nat stepped past her, and filling the dipper to the brim, drank its contents at a draught.

The woman smiled.

“Feel better? Have another, son. Do you travel far?”

Nat did not answer for a moment—the most critical moment in his life. The sight of Nan's face, coarse and bad, her eyes dull and blood-shot from constant drinking, her mouth hard and cruel, had made him determine not to stop here, and when he raised the dipper to his lips he intended to take his departure at once. But the cool spring water cleared his brain and eye, and though to Nan he appeared to be looking into her face, he had seen something that drove away all feeling of fatigue and sent the blood surging through his veins at racing speed. It was a girl's sun-bonnet, lying on the back of the chair where the bucket of water stood.

"I don't know, ma'am," he said slowly. "That depends on you. Will you give me a bed to-night? I have the stamps."

He put his hand into his pocket and drew out a five-dollar bill.

Nan's eyes glistened. The careless manner with which Nat handled his money convinced her that there was more to come. But she shook her head.

"Hardly possible, friend. We're crowded up. Dessay you may have heard" — here she gave a leer that made Nat want to strangle her — "that a rush of folk has come to-night. I reckoned to give up my own room, and camp out. Yet — you have had a hard tramp, and there ain't a bed fit to sleep in anywhere else. We'll fix things, board included, for that note. Will that do ye?"

Nat handed her the money. "What I want most is food. Any supper, mother?"

The woman laughed. "We'll get some in a jiff — but say! Do you sup alone? The boys will be in from the bar presently, and you'll have good company."

"I'll eat by myself, I guess. After, when they are ready, I would like to play. Sandy Rathlee here to-night?" He asked the question softly, and dropped his eyes.

The woman stared. "What's that for?" she said in a hoarse, strained voice. "What have *you* to do with Sandy? Tell me quick, or you don't come further."

Nat saw that he had made a very serious blunder. "I wish to play with him," he replied promptly, — "a fair, square game." Then, as he saw the woman still eyeing him suspiciously, "I will tell you something. We met some weeks ago, and he nearly cleaned me of six thousand dollars. I want you—if he's here to-night—to give me a show to be even with him, and to hold the stakes."

Nan's brow cleared, though she still looked curious. "I'll do it, son. Durned if you ain't a boy after my own heart, small though you be. Why there ain't another man in the county would ha' dared to think of such a thing. You shall have your way, a fair show and all. Come now and have your supper quiet in my room. We must fix up the game there, away from the boys. Have you six thousand on you now?"

Nat coughed and hesitated, or pretended to hesitate in his answer, and Nan laid her hand on his mouth. "There, then—say nothing. 'Tweren't a fair question no ways. Follow me now, and walk quiet."

She led the way through the kitchen and down a long dark passage. Nat's faculties were now strung to the highest pitch; as Nan turned away he seized upon the sun-bonnet, and dropped it under Shep's nose. The dog snuffed at it, and then, with a low whine, took it in his mouth. At a sign from Nat he dropped it again, and Nan found them close behind her when she entered the passage. There were three doors there, one to the left, one at the end, one to the right. The last of these was open, and led to the upper regions of the house. Nan passed it and Nat followed her, but Shep stood still. With his fore-feet on the first step he looked wistfully at his master, moving his nose slowly from side to side, and sniffing at the air. Nat set his teeth and drew a long breath. How he longed to give Shep the sign he waited for, and to follow him up those stairs. But such an action would be suicidal, and he shook his head, and very unwillingly Shep crept back. Hardly was this over when Nan turned round. She gave a perceptible start when she found Nat at her elbow. "You might be an Indian, boy. You step so quiet that I most thought you'd reckoned it weren't good enough, and made a scoot."

Nat shook his head. "I've come some thirty miles to find Rathlee. All I feared was that he might be gone. I can wait all night if he's busy — now that you will see it through for me, mother."

Nan nodded, smiled complacently and opened the door at the left of the passage. They entered a small room, the walls ornamented with glass cases full of a variety of bottles containing samples of every species of spirituous liquor. There was a table with a pack of cards upon it, a miniature bar, and half a dozen rocking-chairs and spittoons. Clearly this was a sanctum where Nan only admitted privileged guests. A door at the end led into the saloon proper. This door was half glass, of a kind that enabled Nan to see all that passed outside without being observed herself. "You set here, friend, while I send in the supper. Are you a patient kind of man? I see it in your face. That's good — fur Sandy is much occupied, and it will be late before I can tote him to business. He's come a journey, too, and when he's tired he sucks in whiskey enough to drown some men. Then without doubt he'll have contracted to play a game already, so it may be two hours before he's ready. I'll tell him at once, and bring you his reply."

She opened the glass door and a rush of hot, unpleasant air came into the room, with the sound of a babel of tongues which died to a mere buzz when the door closed again.

The moment Nat was alone he looked round him and noted every detail in the room. Then he stepped quietly to the door of the passage, withdrew a key that was in the lock, and catching up some bits of matches and a cigar-end, stuffed them into the key-hole and jammed them there firmly with the end of the key. It would be impossible to secure the door again without a patient picking out of all this rubbish.

This done, he went to the glass door. The saloon was a long room, and at the end nearest to him was a table set for supper for many men, beyond it were card-tables, and beyond that the bar itself and a stove with a ring of chairs. Every available inch of room was occupied by men. Nat ran his eye quickly over the crowd and calculated that there were at least fifty. Behind the bar were two Chinamen serving drinks at a great speed. Nan, her arms akimbo and a smile upon her face, was standing between these two men, towering a head above both, and exchanging chaff and greetings with

her customers. Seeing her thus occupied, Nat left this door and cautiously opened the other. The passage was empty, the only door open being the one on the stairs. To this door Nat went with his quick, soundless tread, drew the key from the lock, and with some more rubbish he had taken with him stuffed up the key-hole securely. The whole operation barely occupied a minute. Then he returned to Nan's parlour and peered through the glass door again. She was no longer behind the bar, but nearer to him, talking to one man apart from the rest — and Nat's heart gave a fierce leap, as he involuntarily clenched his hands. This man was Sandy Rathlee.

Every detail in Rathlee's dress, form, and face Nat marked down. The round, cat-like head, the light-brown eyes, near together, the nose broad and flat, with full nostrils, the bushy moustache, thick lips and heavy jaw. The tall, powerful figure of the man was far too large for his head, which looked like an apple on the top of his broad shoulders. By night or by day Nat would know this man. When the conversation was finished Nan led the way to the parlour, Rathlee following with an expression of some perplexity. Nat saw this, and

divined that Rathlee was cudgelling his brains to think of a man he had played cards with for six thousand dollars. The risk of detection now became very great, but boldness was the only policy now.

"Here's the little man, Sandy," was Nan's introduction. "D'ye remember him? You ought to. He seems to remember you."

She laughed, but her eyes were anxious and enquiring, and from the scowl on Rathlee's face Nat judged that the genuineness of his mission was more than doubted. Rathlee gave an ugly grin. "Never saw him in my life. You've been well fooled, Nanny girl, and if I come in anyways at all, it will be to kick the little sheep-man out. What say? Six thousand dollars, indeed; six thousand dead grasshoppers! I tell you it's a lie right through."

He gave a fleering laugh, and Nat was blinded for an instant by the rush of hot blood to his brain. But the instinct of self-control kept him still and so quiet outwardly that Nan, looking from one face to the other, only saw his eyes dilate and a curious pallor overspread his face. He took a step forward. "Your memory is short. Though the night was dark I saw your face. Do you remember Clinter's Ford?"

Rathlee started and caught his under-lip between his teeth. "By ——," he exclaimed, "it's the Comanche!"

"I had sold my sheep," Nat went on, speaking to Nan, "and was journeying West with six thousand dollars. This man and his friends reckoned to release my pile, and tried their level best at Clinter's Ford. But we went through them, and though they followed on, the sheriff jumped them before we reached Las Animas. Sandy Rathlee ran away."

Nat said the last words very slowly, and Rathlee went purple in the face. He saw, however, that any outburst of rage would only make him ridiculous, and tried to turn it off with a laugh. "He has it pretty straight. That was a piece of bad luck for us. Well, sonny, and what's now? Want to play *me*? Why, you ought to go to the sheriff yonder — you can see him at the bar — and tell him to rope me in as a notorious road agent. Ha, ha!"

"That may come," Nat answered, his immovable face in strong contrast to the other's glaring like a tiger's at bay; "but not in Amenta. I have followed you to do what I said a while ago — play a square game — madam here to hold the stakes."

"And the stakes?"

“I’ll name them when we sit down to it. Will you play?”

Rathlee looked at the speaker from head to foot for several seconds without answering. He did not know that Maizie had been in the coach at Clinter’s Ford, and no direct suspicion of Nat’s purpose had entered in his mind; but now something in the expression of the hawk-like face, for all its quietness, — a glitter in the eyes, an intensity of resolution in the tightly compressed lips, — gave Rathlee a vague consciousness of what lay behind this “game.” He laughed, for Rathlee was no coward, with a look in his sinister eyes that made even Nan shiver. Suddenly he thrust out his hand. “We’ll play, Comanche. You can’t make the stakes too high.”

The fingers of the men then closed in a grasp which was not that of friendship, and the smile died out of Rathlee’s face. It was a very little thing, but he had expected by the strength of his grip to make his enemy feel his inferiority. He found to his astonishment that the fingers of the other grasped his own hand, big as it was, so fiercely that it lay between them flaccid and powerless as a child’s.

CHAPTER XII.

NOT FORSAKEN.

“YOU see his game, Nan?”

“I don’t, indeed.”

Rathlee laughed unpleasantly. They had left Nat and were talking in whispers in the dining-room. “It’s plain as morning light. Some ways the little Comanche has heard of my bust this morning, and he’s come to take her away, and to choke me, or knife me, or shoot me, as may be most convenient. Perhaps she is his girl. Who knows? Anyway he’s a sheep-man and she’s a sheep-man’s daughter. I’ll bet you all I have—I’ll bet you the little bird herself—that his stakes are just *her* and nothing else in the world. I’ve seen that look in a man’s eye once before.”

“When was that?”

“Eh? Oh—a little while back. Never you mind my business, friend. I tell you it don’t pay folk to

look at me his way. Comanche Nat will find out that before he's a day older."

"Why is he named so?"

"They say he was in Comanche camp, — kidnapped by some chief when a child. He's been after girls before. When I first heard of him, he snicked two from the Arapahoes, and brought 'em safe to Seckersburg, Kansas. This will be his last frolic, little skunk! But, say, I'm thirsty. I'll get back to the boys now and put them up to the fun that's coming. I suppose supper won't be long. Give *him* a big one, Nanny, it will be a tidy while before he gits another."

He gave a meaning chuckle and swaggered away to the bar. Nan Sheehan stood still thinking, then walked slowly down the passage to the left of her own room and, softly opening the door, peeped in.

Nat, having made his plans, was lying back in one of the rocking-chairs with closed eyes. Nan with a tread as soft as a cat's crept up to him. The fatigue of the long run and the warm room had overpowered him for a few moments, and he had fallen asleep. What was it that stirred Nan Sheehan with a feeling that she had not felt since girlhood? She was a bad woman — corrupt and degraded years and

years ago ; her nature, naturally stubborn and rude, was now harder than that of most of the men she mixed with, as the nature of a woman who has fallen must always be. And yet she was a woman still. As she looked into the sleeper's face,—to her that of a mere boy—which a few hours hence would be cold and dead, her heart ached. Twenty years ago Nan had been a mother. Her baby lived three years, then slowly wasted away with malignant fever. This had been the grief of her life, and though she had tried to stifle it since by drink and evil living, the memory of the child was in her heart as fresh as ever. Had he lived, she thought, he would have been just the age of this lad, with the same audacity, fearlessness, and strength of will.

A shout of laughter came from the bar of the saloon. Rathlee was telling his friends of the "fun" which lay in store for them to-night. Nan heard him. Her face became stern and hard, and she muttered strong words between her teeth. She was a violent woman, dangerous to rouse. The sound woke Nat. He did not start when he saw the face above him, but Nan noticed his eye glance swiftly round the room, as one who felt that he was in danger. She laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Rest, son. This

house is mine, not Sandy's." She was about to say more, when the promised supper was brought in, and Nat set so vigorously to work upon steak and potatoes, beans and sour-kroust, bread, butter, cheese, and coffee, that Nan bided her time and sat and watched him in silence. Her presence there would have destroyed Nat's appetite if anything could have done so, for the plan he had laid down was to find his way to Maizie while his hostess was engaged elsewhere. It was not difficult to detect interest and approval in Nan's face. Whatever the cause, she seemed disposed to be friendly. But what might not lie behind? The one comfort to Nat was that he felt sure Maizie was in the house and unhurt, and that Mistress Sheehan had not the least suspicion of his purpose.

A few minutes sufficed to enable Nat to refresh himself sufficiently. Nan cleared away the dishes herself, and as the door closed behind her, Nat hoped the moment for action had come. But she returned again almost immediately, unlocked a case containing bottles and placed one full of whiskey on the table. There was a look of excitement on her face. Signing to Nat to help himself, she filled a tumbler half full of the spirit, and drank it at a breath.

“Drink, son,—come! Pshaw, what a thimbleful. A man who runs thirty miles to meet a lion in his den and stirs him up when he gets there as you stirred Sandy, must keep himself well nourished.” She paused to drink again. “What interests me,” she went on slowly, “are the stakes you play Sandy for to-night. I guess you might hand them over now. The boys are so eager that perhaps they won’t be long. Where *are* those stakes, my son?”

She smiled and shook her finger at him. Nat felt that the end was coming. “In the room above us,” he answered coolly.

Nan gave a slight start. “How did you guess she was there?”

“Isn’t it so?”

“Yes.”

They looked at one another intently, and the room was as still as death. Nat knew his life was not worth a minute’s purchase. From the dining-table came the clatter of knives and forks, the Rathlee gang were not ten yards away, but there was no sound in Nan’s parlour except the breathing of those two trying to read one another’s thoughts.

The woman spoke first. “Have you come all this way for her?”

“Yes.”

“And when you have found her—”

“Take her home.”

“But you are corralled.”

“I know.”

“If I tell the boys you’ll be blown to little bits in one half-minute.”

“You will not tell the boys.” He changed his position slightly, and Nan saw that he held cocked a revolver.

She folded her arms and smiled.

“How will that serve ye? You shoot straight, I warrant, but they will be upon you just as quick. You cannot frighten me if that’s your notion. I was never scared in all my life.”

Nat lowered the muzzle of his pistol. “Will you help me, then?”

The appeal was made quite simply. Nan did not feel that the suspicion of a threat lay behind it. She smiled again. “And be blown to bits myself? See—I’ll tell you something. The boys know. Sandy guessed it from your looks. You are in a tight place, Comanche Nat. I’ve seen many on the spikes in my time, but none worse fixed than you. How do you feel, lad? Tell us that.”

She was still smiling, and Nat thought she was mocking his despair. Had he been less desperate he could have killed her for her cruelty, but nothing affected him now. For a little while he sat still, listening. Then he rose and quietly moved backwards towards the door. The revolver was still in his hand, and Nan, watching him keenly, knew that if she made a movement towards the bar, or raised her voice, she would pay for it with her life. The situation affected her curiously. The strange notion that her son, had he lived, would have been in this lad's place, overcame her entirely now. A dark flush overspread her face and she held out her hands with a gesture of entreaty. "Stop it, sonny. Stop it, I say, *right there*. I were only fooling. I swear now — and God Almighty knows I never broke my oath — that I will stand with you to the death. Aye, agin Sandy Rathlee, though he has been my friend, and agin all he can bring to help him, though they was devils instead of men. If ye don't believe me, take your knife and drive it through. 'Twill make no sound, and give you the chance you wish to get her clean away, and dead folk tell no tales. Do what you please. I will stand 'tween you and those who'll murder ye — if I wring Sandy's neck with my own hands."

She had crossed the room to him now, and stood with her hands behind her back, breathing heavily. Nat gave her one quick glance, and then thrust his pistol into its sheath. "I take your words as they are spoken, mother. Shall we go upstairs?"

A smile, like a rift of sunlight between dark clouds, lit up the woman's heavy face. She grasped his hand with one of hers and laid the other on his shoulder. "I'll take you to her quick as we kin step. It will make me young myself to see you two. Let me say this while I have the chance. She is worthy of you, lad. She never cried nor winced one little bit,—slip of a thing as she is,—but kept quiet and stiff-like in the face, and thanked me when I brought her up some coffee, as if she were in an hotel. Now come ; there ain't no time to waste."

With a swift tread, as quiet as Nat's own, Nan led the way through the hall, and up the stairs. Nat's heart began to beat so fast now that he lost his breath. If any doubt had existed in his mind as to Mistress Sheehan's good faith, it was dispelled by the sight of Shep, who, though restrained by his intelligence from barking, asserted himself by bounding up the stairs in front of them, his ears erect and his tail wagging violently. At the door of the

first landing he paused and whined. Nan stopped at the stair head. "He's took you there, not me. Tell the boys so if they ask questions. I'll go no further now. In a few minutes I'll call for you and let ye out. Till then all's safe."

She turned back down the stairs, and Nat was left in the passage with a key in his hand. It was growing dark, and when he opened the door he was only just able to distinguish the outline of a girl's figure by the light of a small window in the roof,—the room was a mere attic,—and could not see her face at all.

For an instant he stood still without speaking a word. The next, Maizie had recognised him, and sprang, with a cry he never forgot, into his arms.

"Nat! Oh, thank God—thank God! I prayed for you, and it has brought you. I feel so safe I could laugh at all I have been through to-day, if it were not so horrible that I wonder I don't go mad. But I will not think of it now. How good of you to have come. Where have you been all this time? We have so missed you. Hush! *Hush!* I heard his voice. I am sure I did. I mean that man's. Or was it that horrible woman? No, I was mistaken. It was only fancy. Don't laugh if

I begin to cry ; you don't know what terror I have been in. The Indians were nothing to these men. If you had not come I *must* have gone mad. What a coward you will think me ; and once you said I was brave. But I cannot help it. It has been too hard to bear all alone. If I had known you were coming I would have laughed at them all."

Maizie tried to laugh now, but her voice was choked with sobs, which could be held back no longer, and burying her face in Nat's breast, she cried like a little child.

As for Nat, he was as much overcome as Maizie herself, though his agitation took a different form. The distress of mind and misery and apprehension she must have endured for her firm nerves and brave spirit to be brought so low, made him positively sick with rage. He could think of no words of comfort, though he racked his brain to say something. All he could do was to stroke her hair, usually so smooth and neat, and now flowing loose and dishevelled over her shoulders, and to kiss her on the forehead as gently as he might have kissed a sister.

But this was enough ; and very soon the slender frame ceased to tremble, the sobs became less and less violent, and at last Maizie raised her head, dis-

engaged herself from his arms, and pushed back her hair with both hands. "I am very sorry to be so foolish," she said, in her natural voice — a little tremulous still. "How good you are, Nat, to be so patient with me. It is over, quite over. Now tell me how you came in this wonderful way just when I needed you most."

Nat told his story, and then slowly and cautiously described their present position. They were sitting on the bed side by side, for there were no chairs in the room, and he took her hand. "You say you feel safe. But I am alone. Rathlee has all this town at his back, and our only chance is to creep away toward Chico Springs before he leaves his supper. Nan Sheehan is our friend, I think. But she cannot hold them in, and when they find you are gone they will hunt for us like blood-hounds. At present we are to keep quiet till Nan brings word that the way is clear. A rescue party may come from Chico Springs, but the men cannot be collected all at once, and they have forty miles to ride. We must not expect them before midnight."

The room was quite dark now, and Maizie could not find the right words to express what she wanted to say; she could only press his hand with both of

hers. The touch wakened into sudden life a longing in Nat's heart which had been there for many weeks. In a few minutes they would start upon their perilous journey; before they started he must know. "Maizie—" It was now his turn to stop and blush and tremble in the darkness; it seemed almost a mockery to speak.

"Yes, Nat."

The words came quite quietly, though his hand held hers with intense pressure. Nat's heart sank. But he would know all, and as the feeling of hopelessness grew apace, his nervousness became less. "I want you to tell me one thing. There is little in it—for you; but it is life and more to me. I—" again he paused, struggling with his words, and uttering them one at a time in sharp jerks like revolver shots. Maizie, quite sure that she knew what he meant, but with a queer thrill at her heart for which she could not account, tried to help him out.

"Yes, dear Nat, I have seen it, and I hope all may go well. You know that you can rely upon me—to do anything that will make you happy. I have never known any man before as I have known you—and there is no one I would so dearly love as my brother—no one in the world."

She spoke earnestly, but, at the last, very tremulously. To her surprise, the hands that held hers so tightly suddenly relaxed their pressure, and became cold and nerveless. She heard him sigh the short, sharp sigh of one who puts away by a great effort some thought of which his mind had been full. A sudden feeling of dismayed perplexity overwhelmed Maizie. She had made some fearful blunder. It was not Bel, after all, whom he cared for. Supposing—but at this moment all conjecture came to a full stop, for Shep, who, after claiming a full share of Maizie's attention, had curled himself up at the door of the room, now gave a low growl, and rose bristling all over. There were steps on the stairs.

Maizie instinctively crept closer to Nat. "It is Nan," he said in his natural tone, but without taking Maizie's hand again. "Shep, come to heel."

A light flickered in the passage, and Mistress Sheehan made her appearance, with a lamp in her hand. "Sorry to intrude, young people," she said, noting with a grim smile that Maizie trembled at her voice, and grasped Nat's arm with both hands. "But if you *are* goin', you'd better git. I have put all the boys outside to the bar and dining-room, and they are well set down to the whiskey. There's just time

for you to slip through the passage, and scoot. Which way are you goin' to strike, Comanche boy — Chico Springs? We—el, then I knows which way to direct Sandy. Quick, now, and if you hear a commotion after a bit, don't be thinking I have gone back on you. I must give the alarm at the right moment, and then start them *wrong*. D'you sabe? Well, then come."

Without further words they stole softly down the stairs, Nan first with the light, Maizie and Nat following, Shep covering the rear. As they passed through the passage at the foot of the stairs, they heard the laughter and loud talking of the men in the saloon, and Maizie turned so white that Nat feared she was about to faint, but she looked up into his face and smiled, and walked bravely on through the kitchen where a Chinaman was washing dishes. He took no notice of them, and now they reached the door where Nat had entered first of all. Nan opened it, and signed to Maizie to pass out. Nat she touched on the shoulder, and as he looked into her face he saw that her eyes were full of tears. "You see, I done it, boy," she whispered hoarsely, "though it may be my death. But that is naught. I'd do it again twenty times, though they

killed me every time. What I want to say is, should they corral you spite of all, tell them to bring you back to Nan's and kill you there. I'll be ready for that, and maybe we'll contrive a way to fool them even then."

She gave him a pat on the shoulder, and before he could answer pushed him into the street and shut the door in his face. Nat drew Maizie's arm within his own, and looked warily about him. The first part of the work he had set out to do this morning was done, but in a strange town, with nothing but their own feet to trust to, and the nearest point of safety forty miles away, there was a great deal left to do.

CHAPTER XIII.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

AMENTA was brisk and busy. Every one but the storekeepers was lounging, chatting, and smoking on and off the sidewalks. Nat and Maizie found themselves in the midst of a crowd of idlers, many of whom began at once to take a lively interest in their movements. There was a rising moon, the sky was cloudless, and though the flaring lamps of the stores threw dark shadows around their narrow arcs of light, a more unfortunate time could hardly have been chosen for the object Nat had in view. Worst of all, he could tell by the convulsive twitch Maizie gave at his arm when two men hailed her with some rude banter in passing, that her nerves had not recovered from the shock her recent danger had given them, and, yet, for the ordeal she had to pass through now, coolness was vitally necessary.

Maizie hoped that Nat would choose some dark

path along which they could slip unperceived. But he knew that to avoid light and the public way, in spite of its dangers, would be fatal. His quick eye noticed that the instant Nan's door closed upon them more than one man stopped to look at Maizie. Probably Rathlee had carried her openly through the town. If so, the only chance of preventing a hue and cry being raised was to saunter down the street among the rest, and not to attempt escape into the darkness until the limit of the light was reached. Nat, therefore, with a whispered word of encouragement, boldly passed, at a deliberate pace, those who turned to look at them, and, with an air of unconcern that his Indian training had thoroughly taught him how to assume, walked on, taking the centre of the road where the crowd was thinnest, but stopping at intervals as if to examine the goods displayed in some of the windows of the stores. So warily, and at so leisurely a pace was he obliged to take his way, that it was half an hour before the busy part of Amenta had been passed. It was one of the worst half-hours Maizie ever endured. Twice, men swaggering by in jingling spurs, broad-brimmed sombreros, and Indian shirts gaudily embroidered with beads and fringes, would have jostled her rudely, but for Nat's quickness in

perceiving their intention. As a result they ran against him instead, and one had his toes badly pounded, and the other received the point of an elbow in his ribs, and nearly lost his balance altogether. Both used strong language, and turned to pick a quarrel; but Nat had slipped to one side and was standing so still, and looked so innocent, that they half believed it must have been some one else, and passed on grumbling. Once a man, very drunk, went so far as to lay a hand on Maizie's shoulder. She gave a little cry and hid her face in Nat's coat, thinking all was over. Nat caught the man by the neck and with a wrench and a twist that sent him reeling back upon a friend also drunk, who first cursed him savagely, and then seeing what had happened struck as savagely at Maizie with a heavy wagon-whip. Nat drew her out of reach of the blow, and spoke to Shep. The next instant the owner of the whip was yelling like a maniac and dancing with pain, having received a bite in the upper part of his heel that would have lamed him for life but for the heavy boots he wore. It was a critical moment. A crowd instantly gathered round. If they sympathised with the enemy, it would go hard with Nat. But they did not. Even in Amenta a blow aimed at an unof-

fending woman was considered bad taste. And amid cries of "Well sarved," — "Bully for the dog," — "Bite him again, waggo," — the man was hustled away and Nat and Maizie passed on unmolested.

The end of the main street was now at hand, and after a little diplomatic loitering at the last of the stores, they slipped into the comparative darkness beyond, and had nothing now to fear but systematic pursuit from Rathlee. There was no danger of Nat losing his way. He could guide himself by the stars as easily as by the sun, and he knew the direction of Chico Springs.

Maizie began to recover her spirits. The cool, refreshing air and the freedom from interference soothed and quieted her fears. She no longer expected at every moment to hear the shouts of the Rathlee gang. Away from the confined space of her prison and alone with Nat, she regained her steadiness of nerve, and replied in the old tranquil tone when asked if she wanted to rest. "I feel so strong that I believe I could walk to Chico Springs. Everything that has happened since this morning seems like a dream — a horrible nightmare, out of which you have wakened me, Nat. I feel wonderfully brave with you."

She smiled into his face in the moonlight, a smile which ought to have made him the happiest of men. But Nat saw nothing. This lull in the storm and stress of the day depressed his spirits as much as it raised Maizie's. It gave him time to remember that the question he had been tearing his heart out to ask all these weeks since the parting at Chico Springs was answered; the dumb, unacknowledged hope which had prevented him from leaving New Mexico until he had seen her again was extinguished. An hour ago his heart would have leaped with happiness to hear her say this. Now—it only ached.

Nat was not naturally obtuse, but he was very ignorant. That Maizie, unknown to herself, could by any possibility care for him, while imagining that he loved Bel, never occurred to his simple mind and never would. Proud, diffident, and very reserved, nothing but the imminent danger of losing his life in the coming struggle with Rathlee would have brought Nat to the point of declaring his love, without encouragement which he would never have received from Maizie—and now—he had done with it forever. She was as dear to him as before, for his love had no tinge of selfishness about it; but

the light of his life had gone out, and nothing that befell him mattered—that was all.

Maizie received no answer and wondered at the grimness of Nat's face. But an explanation which satisfied her was not long in coming. They had been walking briskly since leaving the light behind. Now Nat stopped, and, dropping on one knee, listened intently. "We must shelter somewhere," he said in a quiet tone; "they are on the trail. Let us see what can be made of this shanty."

He took her hand, and laid it within his arm with a caressing reassuring pressure that was very comforting. In the pleasure of this, she almost forgot to think of Sandy Rathlee.

A few paces ahead there lay what had once been an adobe hut such as Mexicans build. It was a poor, tumble-down place, now roofless, with two square gaps where windows used to be, and nothing but an outer wall standing seven feet high, and one within half destroyed. But the walls were as solid as if built of cast iron, and a desperate man, well armed, would be an unpleasant adversary to dislodge from the inner room. Here Nat placed Maizie, first lighting a match and looking for possible snakes. Then, leaving Shep on guard beside her, he stole outside to listen.

The gang was on the way. He could hear the quick, irregular tramp of feet, now and then pausing, as if they were enquiring of people in the street, but moment by moment growing more distinct. He listened for any sound from Chicco Springs, but there was none, nor could there be for hours yet. He returned to Maizie.

“They are coming?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Are they following our track?”

“No.”

“They may pass us then?”

“They may.”

There was an ominous doubt in the way Nat said this, and Maizie watched his preparations with slowly sinking heart. First Nat spoke to Shep, caressing his ears. “Keep quiet, old dog, only fly if they lay a hand on her—guard her, guard.” And Shep, understanding well, nestled up by Maizie and licked her hand.

Then his revolver was placed on the low partition wall, cocked. His knife he took in his left hand, thoughtfully presenting the blade to the moonlight, and watching it glitter there. Then he placed Maizie in the innermost recess and crouched beside

her. They were holding one another's hands now, for the tramp of the pursuers was drawing very near. Both thought of the same thing at the same moment, and Maizie whispered. "Your pistol is in a pocket of my dress—I remembered what you said." He pressed her fingers, then swiftly turned and laid his hand upon the wall. Though the rustle of feet on the grass had been growing more distinct no voices had been heard, but now, only a few yards away, Maizie heard a hoarse whisper which brought her heart to her mouth.

"Stop, Sandy,—hold, I say. Who'll bet they ain't hidin' in the Sanchez shanty? The likeliest kind of place. What?"

"You be —," retorted another voice, Rathlee's. "They have gone a mile past this."

"Anyway, lets go through it first."

"You may [with a deeper curse than before], I will not. The blasted place gives me the shivers. Come away; we only waste time talking. Leave two of the boys. Here, Ike and Mick, stay here while we prospect further on. We'll call for you on the way back, no fear."

There was a sound as of grumbling, and then the tramp of feet died away, and Maizie breathed again.

Something touched her lips—Nat's finger, and she knew that the hut was watched, and the faintest whisper or movement might be fatal. After a time the men outside grew tired of keeping quiet, and began to talk.

"If this ain't foolishness," said one in a peevish tone, "call me a Chinaman. What do Sandy mean? If he's uncertain whether the cuss *is* there, why don't he strike a light and find out? Where is the sense of leaving us laying round? Nan's whiskey must have churned his brain—such as he ever had. If I were bossing the outfit, I'd see daylight through every bit of cover as I went along. What say?"

"Say," replied a deeper voice, dry and sarcastic, "that there never was a man so smartly on the spot as Ike O'Rourke thinks himself to be. There's only one drawback, he never *does* anything. If you feel mean, pard, go in yourself. We'll wait patient as monuments till you come out again. For me, I'd rather stay here; I hev heard too much of Comanche Nat to chance my carcass near him in the dark. As for Sandy, every child in Amenta knows why he'll hold back from Sanchez shanty if he can. You never heard it? See then. Sanchez was a greaser with a few colts, and was the best rider I ever saw with a

yellow face. Sandy was rather partial to him for a while ; but they quarrelled at Nan's one night, and Sandy shot him. Sanchez left a widder and a baby, and what does Rathlee do but step out about midnight after taking entry drinks, and come down here to tell this widder what he'd done. Golls, Ike boy, never did a man make a worse mistake. She were waitin' for him, and wild cats were not in it when she saw his wicked face. He thought she would be weepin' and might be comforted. She were heating a pan of scalding grease, and that was what he got full in the mouth. Wonder it didn't kill him, but she aimed too low, and he still had his sight and his knife and his great strength, and the pain made him mad. Soon afterwards folk saw the hut afire, but none saw Sandy, nor knew where he went ; and the widder and the baby, they were never seen again. That's why he's held clear of the place to-night, and will do, unless he's dead sure the girl's inside. They say he hears that baby crying still, when he's been drinking over much. He's done many things, but I guess he never did a worse night's work than that. Yet, after all, it ain't your funeral, Ikey boy. Now, come, light your match like a man, and tell us what you see inside. I'll stand a drink too if

you air in a fit condition, afterward, to take it down."

The speaker ended his offer with a chuckle. It was received with an oath.

"I'd sooner be toasted by Apaches than put a foot in the cursed place, if that's the truth. Sandy must wrastle with his own spooks; nary a one will I face for him. I most wish I'd let him go alone; durned if I ain't got the creeps, and hear the baby whine myself. Killing *men* is right and business-like, but babies — ugh, it makes me sick — What say yourself?"

"That's just so, Ike, and you'll find the rest of the boys agree. If the girl is in here, as I believe, now, she must be, Sandy will have to run his funeral alone until he gits her out. Here he comes, cursin' like blue smoke."

Sandy Rathlee was in an evil mood. With the consideration for his feelings characteristic of their race, the desperadoes who surrounded him had not failed to make pointed allusions to the episode at Sanchez shanty ever since they left it behind, and as no trace of the fugitives could be found ahead, Rathlee was at last obliged to declare that he would search the place without delay, if it were only to vindicate

his courage. He knew well that let a doubt be cast upon his nerve, and his leadership and place among his gang was lost.

"Hand round a candle, boys," he said, pausing in the doorway of the hut. But no one had a candle. They had not even a match among them which they could lend Sandy Rathlee.

"Then we must fire through the place. Two of you climb the walls to north and east, and let fly into the centre. Ike, fire through the windows here. The rest stand, and be ready, if he makes a bolt."

There was a pause. No one stirred. Rathlee lost his temper, and poured forth curses freely right and left, and said he would go alone.

Some one laughed, and a piping voice remarked cheerfully: "You are talking sense now, Boss. That's miles better than to burn powder in the house, and p'raps shoot the girl by mistake. There's been enough of that done here already. Go in yourself; we'll take care nobody but you comes out."

A deep silence followed these words, and all the men stood expectant, looking at Rathlee. When he saw that there was no way out of it, he tossed his head and laughed contemptuously.

“You are a brave crowd. Upon my word, if I had no more spunk than you I’d hang myself. I’ll go in. Keep clear of the doorway, or you might get hurt.”

He turned from them, but as he reached the door he paused and started back; for a voice within said quietly: “Another step and you are a dead man. Boys, will you let me have fair play?”

If Nat had spoken with the excited emphasis of a man in desperate straits, his appeal would have been laughed at. As it was, the quietness of his tone and the sudden withdrawal of Rathlee from his perilous position, made a great and instantaneous impression on the men, and the hasty order of their leader, “Pile in every man after me, and stop his gabble now,” came too late. Not a man moved, while Rathlee himself, feeling it was certain death to venture in alone, held back, and waited to hear his enemy speak again.

“My meaning, friends,” Nat went on more quietly than before, “is this. Sandy Rathlee and I were to have had a game to-night. I found he was going to crowd me out if he won, so I left town, and took the stakes away. You have corralled me. I don’t deny it; but I won’t give her up while I can fight.

You are all straight men. Let me play Sandy Rathlee now, but with knives, not cards, and let the one who lives carry off the prize. If you say yes to this, we'll fight it out before you all."

Nat paused and waited for the answer. It was a touch and go. While the calm audacity of the proposal pleased the fancy of the men, they had sufficient deference towards Sandy to hesitate before forcing him to accept terms for one who lay virtually in his power. The reply came from Rathlee himself. "If that suits the boys, it suits me."

A shout of approval greeted these words, and amid the cries of "Well spoke, Sandy," — "Make a ring for them right here," — Nat, stopping to kiss Maizie's hand, stepped out into the moonlight, leant quietly against the wall of the hut, and waited.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH-GRIPS.

THE moon was riding high now, the stars were at their brightest. Nothing was wanting to favour the combatants in their struggle, and to heighten the enjoyment of the onlookers. There was some disappointment expressed by the inexperienced when they saw how slightly built and puny the sheep-man looked beside the burly Rathlee, but the older men smiled at one another. The weakest man, they knew well, is formidable when he is fighting for his life. No one doubted that Rathlee would win.

The ground was chosen, the ring formed. The men took off their coats and rolled up their sleeves, and faced one another. So intent was the crowd now upon the coming fight, that Maizie, unable to remain in the hut, stole up unperceived, and with Shep beside her, showing every tooth in his head, looked on at what followed.

Slowly the men circled round one another, drawing close by imperceptible degrees, their eyes fixed with the intensity of tigers — nearer — nearer — nearer, —until one should spring.

It was the culminating point of Nat's life. Again and again since he had known Maizie he had bitterly regretted the Indian training which had often kept him silent when he would have spoken, and made him appear hard and cold when his heart was full of sympathy. But now he thanked God for those long, miserable years. Rathlee had the advantage of superior strength, reach, and height, but Nat had something more valuable than all these.

Now! With a swift lunge of body, arm, and hand, Rathlee sprang forward, his head bent, his left arm held low, the elbow outwards to guard any sudden thrust; his knife in his right hand, so turned that, could he get near enough, with one powerful side stroke he would drive it between Nat's ribs, just below the heart. A savage yell rose from the on-lookers. Nothing but nimbleness, combined with extreme quickness of eye and judgment, could save Nat; but as Rathlee charged, his enemy stepped backwards, and shifting rapidly to the right, and avoiding the blow, stepped in almost at the same moment,

inflicting a heavy thrust in Rathlee's arm, which dropped useless to his side. The shouts of the crowd died away; the most confident now felt nervous. On Rathlee himself the repulse acted like strong wine. Making his helpless arm a shield, he bounded at Nat like a wounded lion. There was no avoidance possible of this attack; Nat met it squarely, and Rathlee's knife sank deep into his shoulder. They closed, and Nat struck two blows in return, so swiftly that no one saw where they went. Rathlee reeled and staggered like a drunken man, struck madly at the air, threw up his arms, and fell heavily backwards. The fight was done.

A long, whispering breath of surprise passed through the crowd of men. The end was so unexpected and came in so sudden a way, that for a moment they stood agape at what they saw. Then they surged forward to examine the prostrate man.

Nat stood aside, and, seeing Maizie, went quickly to her.

She clutched his arm. "Are you hurt?"

"A little; but that is nothing. You should not have left the hut."

"What will happen to us now?"

“If they keep their word, we are free to go.”

But this did not seem likely. With the proposal of a fight for their diversion before them, the gang could afford to be merciful and even generous, but now the tables had turned. Nat had barely time to get his revolver from the hut, when he found himself surrounded by lowering, threatening faces, and heard whispers that proved his position to be as precarious as ever. He had only one more card to play.

“Friends,” he said, looking slowly round, Maizie clinging to his arm, “our contract said that the man who kept his feet should go. I could claim that right now, but I will not. Come back and drink with me at Nan’s; and if there is any man who says the fight was not fought fair, you can judge what best to do with me.”

The men looked at each other askance, like bulls who would like to charge but wait for each other to begin. At length the man with the piping voice spoke out: “I reckon the offer is fair. Things will look clearer presently. I’ll go with you, Comanche Nat, for one.”

This was enough; the rest agreed willingly, and, keeping Nat well in the centre, trudged back to

town. Behind them, still and lifeless, lay all that remained of Sandy Rathlee.

The townsfolk of Amenta marvelled as they saw the returning gang; and when it was whispered abroad that the sheep-man had slain the desperado in open fight, so many followed to Nan's that there was hardly standing-room at the bar. The Chinamen were still there, serving drinks. Nan was also there, actively at work. When she saw Nat and his following, and noted the absence of Rathlee, she took in the situation at a glance.

"Back soon, boys! You've caught more than you sought for? Sandy gone? Is that so? Well, give your orders sharp. I close early to-night. You stand, do ye, sonny? That seems onnatural for a wounded man. Hi there, boys, make way, and let that girl come round to me. Crowds of your nature ain't no place for her."

Nan Sheehan's word was law in her own house, — at least up to a certain point, and in a twinkling she had whisked Maizie out of the press, and placed her in a chair behind the bar. That was something gained, and Nan smiled to herself as she saw the look of relief in Nat's face. But Nan's chief anxiety was Nat himself. Though composedly handing drinks

along the counter to the men with his right hand, he never moved his left, and Nan felt sure by the paleness of his face that he was severely wounded and probably losing blood. Yet she dared not make any sign of sympathy toward him. She knew, none better, the temper of the men. For the moment Nat's free-handedness maintained a party in his favour strong enough to repress the inclination of others to revenge Rathlee's death; but as the liquor mounted to the brains of his admirers there was only too much danger that they would become as violent as the rest.

When Nan became convinced of this she felt that desperate measures must be taken. Through Rathlee's death matters had become far more critical than she had expected when she told Nat to return to her, and while she admired the courage and address which had enabled him to dispose of his enemy, and hold in check the very men who had gone forth to help in his destruction, she saw clearly that not only was his life in imminent danger, but that her influence could avail nothing, and that to keep her word with him was only to share his fate. For an instant she hesitated. She was prosperous in worldly goods, and life was sweet. Her championship of this boy was sheer madness. She had but

to retire to her private room, give orders to her men to close the saloon when all was over, and there would be no more trouble for her. She looked at the dark, threatening faces of the men, and bit her lip in indecision. Then she met Nat's eyes, full of unspoken appeal. Her face became firm and hard. She whispered to the Chinamen, and two shot-guns, loaded with slugs, were taken from a recess beneath the counter and placed upon a chair. These weapons Nan carelessly laid on the counter as if they had been beer-jugs. "Another drink, son — no? Then I've done business for to-night." She raised her voice so that it should be heard by all. "Chang, git to the door, and open it for the folk. Boys, I'm closing. No more drinks till to-morrow morning. I will wish you all good-night. Comanche Nat, I want you here."

While speaking Nan slid back the panel by which she had admitted Maizie; Nat stepped through it, before the men on either side were aware of his intention, and drew the bolt behind him. He was now separated from the crowd by the counter flanked with shelves piled with cigar-boxes, syphons, bottles of wine, and all the paraphernalia of an American saloon. The gang was balked of its prey again. But it was only for the moment. A fierce cry of

remonstrance came from many lips and no one moved toward the door.

"See here, Nan," said one, — a man with a deep scar across his face, the mark of Jeff Collingwood's whip at Clinter's Ford, — "this will not do. You may shut your old saloon, but you don't interfere with business. We'll trouble you to let that man come back and his girl with him. She belongs to us anyway, and we ain't done with him, not by any means."

He raised his voice at the end, and was answered by an ominous growl of assent from those around him.

Nan Sheehan laughed mockingly. "Ain't you, Mick? Then put this in your pipe. Comanche Nat and all that belongs to him are under my protection. He stays here until he wants to go, and any one who disagrees will have to go through me."

She spoke slowly, looking round from face to face, and having spoken laid hands upon her gun.

A visible wave of astonishment passed through the crowd, and there was a lull ; but only for an instant. Then the growl of anger and menace rose again, and more than one voice shouted, "Take her at her word !" — while right and left revolvers sprang out

of sheath, and Nat, whose eyes were everywhere, saw a man take deliberate aim at Nan. A double report rang out, the man's arm was broken below the elbow and his shot flew wide. Nan looked round with a smile.

"You saved me, lad."

She had not time to say more before a dozen shots rattled round the bar, and there was a mighty crash of broken glass; but the aim had been too hasty, and no one was hurt.

Nan's blood was up at last. "Cowards," she shrieked, "take that!"—and bringing her shot-gun to her shoulder, fired both barrels at the men nearest at hand. A frightful yell of pain, and then a storm of bullets in reply. The room filled with smoke. Nat, crouching behind a whiskey barrel, saw that Nan was struck. She had made no attempt to protect herself, and now reeled heavily against him. Yet, blind and bleeding as she was, she caught up the second gun, and fired with such fearful effect into the men now leaping upon the counter with their knives, that for the moment it was swept clear and no one dared to take the place of those who fell.

And now a new sound was in the air. The crash of window glass, the roar of strange voices in the

street outside, and from the door and from the windows came a sudden blaze of rifle shots. The Rath-lee gang turned, thunderstruck, to find themselves surrounded. For a moment or two they fought stubbornly, then, as the enemy burst into the saloon, fled right and left, and held up hands for quarter.

“Hold, boys,” said a stern voice, — it was Ezekiel Mixer’s, — “give them one chance. They have two prisoners — are these still alive?”

The firing ceased. The smoke cleared off, and the men held their breath. Then from the ruined counter came two figures, followed by a dog, and such a shout of joy went up as never had been heard in Nan’s saloon before. Some one ran forward with outstretched arms.

“My little gell — unhurt? Thank God!” And from far and near many a voice echoed these words, — “Thank God!”

CHAPTER XV.

MIXER'S MEN.

NAN SHEEHAN was not dead, nor was she likely to die, if the bleeding from a deep wound in her right side could be stopped in time. Moreover, she was so far conscious that when they lifted her from where she had fallen she spoke out cheerily, though in a faint voice.

“You’ve timed it, boys. Well done! Is that sonny on his feet? Then I don’t care — What? a doctor? You’ll find one, if he’s alive, in this saloon — Ned Washington. But sonny first—he were wounded long ago.”

Luckily enough, Doctor Ned Washington was not only still in this world, though he had had a narrow escape, but proved equal to the occasion. As great a scamp as could be found in the county, or even in Amenta itself, he was a clever practitioner, and under the delicate circumstances under which

he was placed, became anxious to do his best for his patients. By his orders Nan was carried to the private bar where Nat had eaten his supper, and in a very few minutes her wounds were properly bandaged; Nat's shoulder was bound up, and the doctor pronounced them both to be doing well.

It was more difficult to persuade him to dress the wounds of the crippled members of the Rathlee gang, but a stern warning from Mixer as to his own fate if one wounded man was found neglected next morning, conquered his disinclination to work for nothing, and he did his duty well.

Meanwhile, outside the saloon, Amenta was in a state of excitement and confusion impossible to describe. Who and what were these men who had taken the saloon by storm and crushed the Rathlee gang? From mouth to mouth the news was whispered that they came not only to save the sheepman's daughter, but to take the town.

The news was true. For two years the citizens of Amenta had been allowed to cheat, oppress, and plunder all those who had no friends, and had made the town a by-word for corruption and crime. They would do so no more. The Anglo-Saxon race is long-suffering, especially on the other side of the Atlantic,

but even Americans will turn at last — and when they turn, God help their enemies !

Mixer's men — as the Chico Springs army was afterwards called — were but fifty strong, while Amenta could put three times as many in the field ; and further, the former were weary with their ride of forty miles, and fought in a strange country, while the Amenta men defended their own hearthstones. Well might Mixer say to Jeff that morning, when the young man arrived from the ruined ranche with his blood aflame : —

“Do not talk so much — keep your wind and strength for to-night. We go for rats in their holes, boy, *and rats die fighting.*”

But with all these advantages Amenta was in desperate straits. The only places in town that could stand siege were Nan's and the house of the treasurer of the race-course, and, thanks to Mixer's knowledge of the city, and the suddenness of his attack, the first was taken without the loss of a man. It is, however, a doubtful advantage to win the first skirmish in a campaign too easily. While Mixer and Jeff and other friends gathered round Nat and Maizie and Nan, the younger men, hot and thirsty, laid eager hands upon whatever liquor had survived the fray at the bar, and

in a very short space of time would have been past praying for. Luckily Mixer saw the danger, and was among the wine-bibbers in two strides.

“By the holy Moses, boys, you are the hardest crowd of heroes ever seen in life. Listen. In five minutes the rowdies of this town will be coming through those windows. Is this the way you propose to meet the racket? I ask you the question—is it?”

Down went the glasses with a general laugh.

“We’re done, Boss. Take us to ’em, quick.

A man now ran in from the street.

“We’ll be blocked, Captain. They are creeping round us—a crowd double ours, and tough as you ever see.”

Mixer gave one of his dry chuckles.

“Did you look for them to be tender? Now to work, boys—briskly.”

The order did not come a moment too soon; and if the Amenta men had been led by another Ezekiel Mixer, Nan’s saloon would have been the scene of the most sanguinary conflict of the night. But though the enemy was formidable in point of numbers and determination, they were without a leader, and their movements were dilatory. By the time they had

definitely planned their mode of attack, Mixer had secured his prisoners in an upper room, brought down mattresses and blockaded the parlour where Nan lay under Maizie's care with Dan Shelford, whose nerves were still too much shattered for him to be of any service in the fight. Then, with Nat's assistance, Mixer formed an original plan of defence calculated to surprise the Amenta men.

When the attacking party came within pistol-shot, they prepared to receive a volley. None came. The saloon looked deserted. A wind had risen as the moon went down, and now moaned with a dreary sound through the broken windows. Every light had been quenched, and a silence, strange and weird, had fallen over the place as if it were under a spell.

In the street all was dark, too. The stores were shut, bolted, and barred, and their owners watched with anxious eyes the movements of their friends around the saloon. Some still cherished a hope that the strangers were merely sheep-men come to rescue the girl and kill Rathlee. But the rest knew that the great feud was dead, and that this was a rising of settlers of all classes against an intolerable wrong.

The Amenta men advanced cautiously, but no sign

of life appeared in the saloon. At last one among them waved his hat. It was the man with the scar on his face who had been fortunate enough to escape the attack by Mixer's men.

"Boys," he shouted, "will you skulk here all night? Charge in, and whip the devils to Kingdom Come. Forward, every man!"

His words were as the spark to a powder magazine. A yell and a cheer, and the men rushed on with an impetus that seemed likely to carry everything before it. Still there was no sign of life in the saloon. As a consequence a considerable number of men rushed at the door—so many that they impeded one another's progress, while comparatively few attacked the windows.

On they came pell-mell, and the foremost were about to give the door a mighty kick, when it opened before them to its widest, and they saw what made their hearts stand still. Two paces from the door crouched a line of ten men, behind them another line, kneeling, and behind them again ten more standing. As the door opened a voice cried "Fire!" and thirty rifles poured a volley forth, which swept down the Amenta men as a scythe mows grass, while from the windows and from the roof flew another hail-storm of

bullets striking down besiegers on all sides. They scattered like sheep, and those who could do so fled for their lives. Again Zeke spoke, his voice clear and distinct above all other sound.

“Sally out, boys, give them no time to breathe. Those on the roof lay still—the rest on with me.”

With a thunderous cheer the Mixer men obeyed, and dashed down the street in hot pursuit. The enemy made no stand anywhere, but bolted hither and thither like rabbits, those who were quick enough taking refuge in the houses round about until the street was clear.

And now what next?

The thoroughfare was won. The enemy were separated so effectually one from another, that any rally on their part in sufficient numbers to overthrow the Mixer men was almost out of the question, but they were under cover, and began to gall their foes with a fire which could only be stopped in one way.

“Lie down, every one—lie down.”

Mixer was obeyed, and the firing stopped. It was too dark to mark the figures on the ground. There was a pause. The boys became impatient and called Mixer uncomplimentary names. But confidence in his resources kept them moderately quiet, and in a

few minutes they found their faith well justified. He had spoken to three men, who flew down the street to the saloon and returned with something in their arms. Guided by Mixer, they went to the nearest house at a point where they could not be seen by the inhabitants. Then came the scrape of a match, a flash and flare of light, and the mystery was solved. The men had brought torches which had been lying ready for emergencies for weeks at Mixer's store. A steady wind was blowing; the dry wood of the frame shanty caught fire in a moment, and the flames darted up its walls with a devouring roar.

"Cover doors and windows!" was the cry, and when the people in the house, half suffocated with smoke, came tumbling out coughing and choking, they found themselves surrounded.

"Down arms and surrender!"

And under the muzzles of the rifles the citizens obeyed. They were marched off under guard, both men and women—for there were many women in the town—and lodged at Nan's.

The next house was approached in the same way, with the difference that those within were called upon to surrender before the torches were applied. They refused, the place was fired and stormed, and, with

some loss, burned down, its occupants driven out, fighting still, to die.

The sight of the burning houses struck despair into the hearts of the citizens of Amenta. Some were for laying down their arms; but the majority, who — such were their past lives — knew that they fought with halters round their necks, preferred shooting or even burning to hanging, and fought with such fury that some of Mixer's principal allies began to waver.

"Why go on?" they asked. "The gang is split; the worst rowdies are all dead, we have done justice, to do more would be cruelty."

Mixer listened to these arguments without saying a word, though there were deep murmurs from the younger men. It was a strange situation. Those who counselled peace were ranchemen, whose daily business was often carried on in the face of great risk to life and limb; who had fought Indians — the bloodiest of all human foes — and would again, while Mixer, whose set lips and flashing eyes showed plainly the feelings with which he listened to their words, was a mere trader who had not struck a blow or seen blood spilt for ten years past.

In reply to the waverers he said with the quietness and deliberation habitual to him: —

“My partners, you speak fair. We are made different, that is all. I left my wife and children. I rode forty miles for what? To save a girl and shoot Rathlee? No. I say *no*. That had to be done and done first. But that was for the young men, and well they did it. I came for something more. The country you and me have lived in has been disgraced, and nigh cut to pieces by these men. We have to see that this shall never be again. You say, ‘Let the place be left to repent its ways.’ I say, ‘Finish what you have begun. Take all and try them justly before honest men.’ That is what I’m here for. Stay by me or leave me, which you think is right. My body don’t leave Amenta till Amenta’s ours. Those who feel this way vamos now.”

He caught up a torch, and striding to the nearest house, planted it under the eaves on the windward side. With a mighty shout his men followed, not one holding back, and now the citizens of Amenta felt the end was near.

House after house was fired, stormed, and taken, until half the town was in flames. The strain upon the attacking party began to tell, and Mixer sent to Nan’s for reinforcements. One of those who

went was Nat, now completely exhausted. He managed to reach the saloon, give a message to Jeff, and then fainted—for the first time in his life.

A few minutes later those who had stayed behind to garrison Nan's took the place of their tired comrades, and Mixer, with Jeff at his right hand, found himself stronger than ever.

A new feature in the struggle now began. One after another of the houses were found to be empty. At first it was thought that in spite of the vigilance of scouts whom Mixer had placed to prevent escape, the people were leaving the town; but presently it was discovered that every man who could, had made his way to the house of the treasurer of the race-course. Like Nan's, this building had two stories, but unlike the saloon, the upper story was of wood. All that could be done, however, to make it formidable had been done. Every window and aperture was guarded by men with rifles, and a constant dropping fire was poured upon the besiegers when any came within range. It was here that the last stand was to be made, and it would be an obstinate one.

To make matters worse, when Mixer's men began to invest the place, and, crouching low in the shadow, waited for the signal to attack, they heard the sob-

bing of women mingled with the wail of little children. Earnestly did Mixer call upon those within to surrender, warning them that no escape was possible. The answer was a volley of oaths, mingled with abuse of the worst kind in a woman's voice, showing too clearly the character of the inmates. No alternative remained, therefore, and Mixer gave the word.

"Set to, boys. Look careful to the babies and women. No fire this time."

A volley, a counter-volley from the house, a rush at the door, and a sudden falling back. The door had holes bored through it, from which came the bullets of revolvers and the points of knives. The windows, also, were so well guarded that no impression could be made there.

"Steady," was Mixer's order. "Hold quiet while we try a surer way."

The attack ceased, upon which came jeering laughter from within, and the blood of Mixer's men boiled over. It was the first check, and they were in no mood to brook such opposition. One of them, with an oath, seized a lighted torch, and deliberately flung it on the roof. In another moment his example would have been followed by a dozen others, and the house

be afire in as many places. But Mixer brought his rifle to the shoulder, there was a sharp report, and the man fell dead.

"I did that," Zeke said, looking round, "and if any one else calling himself a man puts his hand to burn out children, I will do it again."

No answer was given to this challenge, but those who had caught up torches dropped them one by one as if they burnt their hands.

And now arrived what Mixer had sent for as soon as he saw that the house was going to stand a siege. It was a huge vega, or beam, which had been left in a wagon near Nan's. Some of the boys hauled the wagon to the place of action, and a score of hands seized upon the beam, dragged it out, and with a run and a cheer brought it with tremendous force against the door. Bolts, locks, and bars availed nothing now ; with a heavy crash the door was carried off its hinges and laid flat in the hall, with two Amenta men under it, and half a dozen besiegers sprawling on top. A yell, and a rush of Mixer men. An answering shout and a volley from within, then the angry sound of smothered shots, and blows, groans, and curses, as the attack and defence, each as stubborn as the

other, surged through the hall, and up the stairs, and on from room to room. To add to the confusion and horror of it all the lights had been put out, and the men fought in darkness.

In the front and fiercest heat of the fray was Mixer himself, and furious were the attacks made upon him when, by his voice, as he encouraged his men, his whereabouts was known. But he seemed to bear a charmed life — in point of fact he was protected by a guardian angel in the shape of Jeff Collingwood. Jeff had grown to feel the strongest regard for Zeke Mixer. Though they had only known one another a few weeks, the nature of the storekeeper had impressed the younger man with extraordinary force, and where Mixer led, Jeff would have followed, had it been into the pit of Tophet. Go where Mixer might, Jeff was close at hand, with eyes that seemed to see in the dark as well as if it were day, with steady nerves, and with the strength and activity of two men. Step by step and inch by inch the Amenta men were driven back. The hall was free, the stairs were free, and one after another of the rooms were taken. At last one only at the top of the house was left. The women and children were huddled here with half a dozen of the wounded,

and a few fighters, their eyes blood-shot, their limbs trembling with fatigue, but fierce to the last, and ready to make a sacrifice of the helpless ones, if, by so doing, they could kill a few more enemies before their own turn came. There was some light in this room, for the day was dawning, and in the roof was a large window with an eastern view.

Mixer entered the room first, and, ordering his men to stand, called upon all to surrender. His only answer was a savage oath, while the women and children looked on helplessly. Before the struggle began, however, a sudden, sharp cry rang out, "Fire! Fire!" followed by an ominous glare from beneath the window, and a gush of smoke.

A universal shriek rose from the women. All resistance was at an end. The men, even the wounded ones, dashed through the window, and rolled or sprang off the roof, and it seemed as if the women would follow their example in sheer blind terror. But Mixer's men, thanks to Zeke and Jeff, did not lose their heads. In less than five minutes a passage was cleared down the stairway, and through the blinding smoke man after man rushed at desperate speed, each bearing a child or a woman according to his strength. In the room itself, with the smoke

curling through the boards beneath and the atmosphere becoming hotter every moment, Jeff and Mixer kept the rest still. A crash below—the staircase had given way. The crisis was now terrible.

“On the roof, boy,” Mixer gasped hoarsely to Jeff; “fresh air is the only chance.”

One woman was already insensible, and how Jeff managed to lift her through the skylight to Mixer he never knew, but he did it; the rest, with his help, clambered up, and then they saw the full extent of their peril. The house was burning fiercely, and in a few minutes the roof must fall in with a crash. Fortunately the wind had changed, and on the side where they were clinging there was little smoke. By this time the boys were all aware that their leader was in danger and were crowded around the spot, some holding out a blanket. Into this the children were dropped safely, then the women. There was now but one more moment before the roof would go.

“Jeff, lad—jump!” cried Mixer, holding back.

Jeff said nothing, but putting a strong arm round Zeke, with a sudden jerk sent him flying, against his will, into the blanket. Another crash—the roof was falling—a cry from the crowd as Jeff nearly lost

his balance, then a ringing cheer which was repeated again and again, when, black as coal, with hardly a hair left on his head, he leapt clear and alighted on his feet among his friends, unhurt.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAIZIE'S EXPLANATION.

THE fighting was over, Amenta was won, and Mixer's boys from being destroyers of life became ambulance men, nurses of the sick, and even cooks and maids-of-all-work.

The Western man, like the sailor, can turn his hand to anything, and when the sun rose every soul who had the use of his arms and legs, except the few told off to guard the prisoners, was hard at work.

The busiest of all — planning, ordering, doing all at once — was Zeke himself. His right arm was in a sling and his head was bound up to cover a fearful gash over his left eye, but he made nothing of his hurts and for two hours after his narrow escape from the burning house, laboured untiringly to evoke order out of chaos. At last he retired to eat some breakfast in Nan's parlour. Nan was here, sitting up, hardly less busy in her way than Mixer. She

was not allowed to move, but from her couch made shrewd and practical suggestions, gave information as to the whereabouts of stores of provisions and linen, and placed at Zeke's disposal everything she possessed.

By evening only the smoking ruins of the burnt houses still gave evidence to the eye of what had happened in the preceding twenty-four hours. The dead were underground, the wounded in hospital; and even the prisoners, having been supplied with food and drink and allowed as much liberty as the circumstances of the case admitted, were in better spirits, and talked cheerfully of suing Mixer for damages and false imprisonment.

The following day the principal ranchemen of the surrounding country rode in to congratulate Mixer, and to take part in the trial of the prisoners. A jury of twelve of these was formed and sworn in. Mixer, by unanimous consent, was selected judge, and within three days every Amenta citizen, including Nan herself, had been brought to trial.

The prisoners were heard in their own defence, questioned by the jury, cross-questioned by the judge, and then summarily dealt with in one of three ways. Those against whom murder was proved were sen-

tenced to death. Those who were known to have robbed, or in other ways maltreated their neighbours, were heavily fined in amounts according to their means. Those against whom nothing definite was proved, but of whom much was suspected, were ordered to leave the town with all their belongings in twenty-four hours.

The most difficult case to deal with was Nan's. After long deliberation the judge and jury were inclined to make the punishment merely nominal, in consideration of the protection she had afforded Maizie and Nat, her personal injuries, and the wreck of her saloon, which by the time all was over had been stripped of its stock and a great deal of its furniture. But the prisoner, to the astonishment of her judges, refused to be let off.

"'Tain't fair," she said when informed of the decision. "I have not robbed, neither have I killed. But I've helped the worst. I have winked at what I might have stayed. The boys of Amenta kep' me, good and bad alike. Put my name down and take \$2000 and what is left here and tell me to quit the town." This was done and early on the morning following her trial Nan set forth upon a journey.

She went to Chico Springs. Nat and Jeff, Maizie

and her father, were going that day, and Maizie, finding that the sick woman's one desire was not to lose sight of Nat, proposed that she should go with them. A light spring wagon was chartered, and fitted with cushions and pillows, and with Dan driving, Maizie in charge of Nan, and Nat and Jeff riding, they set off, no one knowing but Nan herself that the doctor had expressed it as his deliberate opinion that a journey so soon would cause inflammation of her wound and probably death.

Nan had her reasons for defying the doctor. She was anxious about Nat. Her eyes were sharp, and her perceptions, keen at all times, were quickened by the love she bore him. His reserve, and the stoicism of his quiet manner, though proof against all other eyes, did not deceive her for an instant. While his friends found in his wound and the physical strain he had undergone sufficient explanation for his haggard looks, and a settled despondency and silence which had marked him since the night in the saloon, Nan saw something more. Something which robbed her of sleep at night far more than the pain of her wound — something that filled her with a feeling almost amounting to dismay. She saw that life was worthless to him — because the girl he had so nearly died for

only gave in return for all his love the affection of a friend. All this Nan saw clearly enough, and to see it was sufficient to make her determine to help him. But how? She was sure that Nat had spoken and been refused. He avoided being alone with Maizie. He rarely looked at her, or spoke to her. Moreover, it was plain that Maizie noticed this and was pained and puzzled. Yet, closely as Nan watched the girl's face, she never once saw anything to give her ground for belief that Nat was making a mistake. And Nan was afraid of Maizie.

The journey was a long and tiresome one. It was very hot, and there was no shade for Nan but the wagon tilt. This, added to her anxiety of mind, brought on inflammation, prophesied by Washington, and while they were ten miles still from Chico Springs she became so ill that a halt was made at a ranche by the wayside, and Jeff rode forward to fetch a doctor.

The doctor came in a few hours, and with him Mrs. Mixer, who, touched by the story Jeff told of Nan's devotion, came to be nurse-in-chief, bringing a buggy full of medicines and comforts. But Nan would have no nurse but Maizie, and the doctor pronounced her in so critical a condition that she

must be allowed to have her way. The fever steadily increased, Nan became delirious, and for twenty-four hours lay between life and death. The next day there were signs of a change. The delirium ceased, and she became conscious of her surroundings; and Maizie hoped that the worst was passed. But the doctor shook his head.

“There’s no telling—but I don’t like her looks. If she had lived as Mis’ Mixer there, I believe she’d rally, but she has spiled the constitootion natur’ give her by—by the keeping of saloons, and natur’s rounding on her now. She’ll sink.”

The doctor spoke the truth. Nan had no more fever, and did not lose consciousness again; but she grew steadily weaker. She was in no pain, and lay there as peacefully as if her life had been blameless as a child’s. From the beginning she told Maizie she had no hope herself.

“I felt I were gone, dear, when I dropped in the saloon. There’s something tells one. That was why Judge Mixer found me so generous yesterday. I am not sorry to go. Seems as if I ought to, for, come to think, few of the boys, bad as they were, was half so bad as me. What? Sonny and you! Nothing is due to me. I stood out for you both

'cause I loved him. No virtue, noways, in fighting for what you love. Yes—I hev been bad, and there is not a parson anywheres, if he spoke the truth, who would dare to bet one cent upon my soul. Yet I'm not afraid to die. I know all 'bout hell-fire. As far as I can recollect, our minister taught nothing else where I were bred. Maybe he was right. I dunno—yet someway it is not that which holds my mind tightest. I believe that whatever they do to me that's bad, they'll let me see my baby boy. An' if they do I'll not complain if the fire and brimstone come along in buckets afterwards."

She paused and closed her eyes and opened them to say drowsily :—

"Let me doze a spell, while you bring sonny in. I don't feel I quite know when I may go, and I want to see his face."

Maizie rose gently, and then struck by a painful look of yearning on the haggard face, from which all the coarse hard lines had been refined away, she stooped over Nan and kissed her. The dying woman started, then raised herself with such a gesture as the one she had made when imploring Nat's confidence in the saloon, and clutched Maizie's hands.

“Do you mean that?” she gasped.

“Yes,” said Maizie wonderingly.

“Then you will bear one word from the old woman ’fore she dies. I only want to ask a question just for to ease my mind. See, then: A while ago you was in danger. Now you are as safe as can be. Why? ’Cos a man stepped in alone where none else dared to go, and brought you out. I have lived many years; and when I was young I read many books, but I never saw nor read of any deed quite similar to Nat’s. You feel so, too? You *do*? Yet he cannot reach your heart! There, I won’t ask my question. What should a gell without a heart answer anyway? Let him go back East to his folk. Better out of sight than to tear his heart in two loving what don’t love him. Yet—I will ask my question after all. Why is it? Why don’t you love him with that love he has given you?”

While Nan was speaking she became more and more excited. Blue veins stood out on her forehead; she trembled all over; her brows drew down into their old frown, and her face, for all its thinness, became almost as fierce as when she defied the Rathlee gang. When she said the last words

she searched Maizie's face with eyes that pierced to the soul. As she gazed the fierceness gave place to bewilderment so overpowering that she could hardly answer the question with which Maizie made reply.

"Why should you say I have no heart?—you are making a great mistake."

"Old folk like me don't make mistakes, gell. Yet your looks, now—but say, what is the mistake you reckon I have made?"

Maizie paused a moment before speaking. Under Nan's gaze her cheeks had turned fiery red and her words came brokenly. Now she mastered her confusion and spoke in a quiet voice, though the flush was still upon her face.

"From what you said you seem to think that Nat loves—me. It is my sister."

Nan opened her mouth here, but shut it again without speaking. Maizie waited an instant and then went on hurriedly.

"If you knew Bel, such an idea as this would never have occurred to you. She is beautiful, she is everything which I am not. I suspected what was going on when we travelled from Kansas: after he left us at Chico Springs I became quite sure.

And only the other day he said something about it and I — ” Maizie cleared her throat.

Nan caught her up sharply.

“What did you say, little one? Tell me all.”

“I only said — ” Maizie spoke in a whisper now — “that I understood and loved him — as a sister.”

Again Nan’s eyes swept searchingly over the girl’s face and again that face reddened deeply. Neither of them spoke for a little while, then Nan murmured in a feeble voice : —

“Kiss me — little one,” and as Maizie bent over her : “You were right, my daisy, I made — a big mistake. Now send sonny in.”

Nat sat with her a long time. It was the afternoon, and the household of the ranche were assembled in the kitchen, sitting round the lighted stove, as Western folk will do in the hottest weather, gossiping. The doctor was there with Dan Shelford and Mrs. Mixer, and the good lady of the ranche, who, in hospitable Western fashion, made nothing of this upset to all her family arrangements. In the room next to Nan’s, furnished with some pretence to elegance, and therefore rigorously avoided by its owners except on Sunday, Maizie sat alone, darning her father’s socks. While her fingers flew busily

her thoughts swung like a pendulum from those words of Nan's to that time when Nat had spoken to her about his love — and she had, as she thought, answered so judiciously.

What was she to think now? Maizie knitted her brows and thought hard for the space of half an hour. At the end of that time she heard the sound of an opening door, and Nat came into the room.

“How is she?”

“Sinking fast.”

Maizie set her work aside, and as she rose, Shep, who was lying at her feet, rose too; and leaning lovingly against her looked at his master, and slowly wagged his tail.

“I must go to her,” Maizie said.

“Not yet.”

She looked up and tried to speak. But no words came. He took her hands and laid them on her breast.

“Maizie, is there any hope for me?”

Her lips trembled, and she smiled, but still she did not speak. Slowly then, but very tenderly, Nat's arm closed round her, and he took his answer from her lips.

A sound came from the other room, a faint voice

calling Nat by name. He answered and went in, holding Maizie by the hand.

Nan was breathing with difficulty. Her face was drawn and grey with the shadow of approaching death, but when she saw Nat and Maizie she feebly held out her hands.

“So all is right,” she whispered faintly. “Kiss me, sonny. Maizie, little one,—” she gasped for breath, and in her eyes there was a deprecating, imploring look which the girl could not understand at first,—“I was bad, oh, I was wicked—if you can forgive—tell me, before God, with your hand in sonny’s. Can you—can you forgive me what I might have done?”

Maizie dropped on her knees and kissed the anxious face.

“I forgive it all. God bless you.”

Nan sighed, and the deep furrows in her forehead smoothed themselves away. Her eyes closed, the clasp of her hand upon Nat’s relaxed, and without a struggle or a pang she passed peacefully away.

CHAPTER XVII.

JEFF TAKES ADVICE.

NAN's funeral took place at Chico Springs. Her instructions on the matter to Nat had been precise.

"Mind, sonny! No preaching, nor praying, nor nothing. Put me in deep and leave me there, and don't have no stone cross nor railing round the grave. Though I'm a bad woman, and the world's well quit of me, I want no one to intercede about my soul. That I have to wrastle out alone with the Almighty. If your little one in there will forgive me, and you think kindly of the old woman now and then—I ask no more from any one on earth."

They buried her, according to her wish, and no funeral service was read over the grave, and by the springtime, when the fresh grass grew over it, only Nat and Maizie knew where the poor body had been laid to rest.

When Mixer returned from Amenta, it was found

that Nan left a will with him, leaving all she possessed to Nat—a sum not far short of \$20,000. This money, however, Nat, with Maizie's full consent, refused to take, and after much discussion induced Mixer to divide it among the families of those who had lost their husbands and sons in the battle of Amenta.

The news of Nat's and Maizie's engagement was received by their friends, with two exceptions, with the complacency and smiling patronage of people who had known what was going to happen all the time, and were surprised that it had not happened before. The exceptions were Bel and Jeff. Bel embraced her sister rapturously.

“Oh, Maizie, that is just *right*. It is funny to think, now, that until Mr. Collingwood brought us that dreadful news about you, and said that Nat, looking like death itself, had gone after those horrible men alone, I never guessed what made him so *very* angry with father that day for offering him money. But after this I never doubted what his feelings were. I am so delighted, darling—and as for Nat, he deserves even you. Mr. Collingwood says he is the bravest man he ever saw in his life.”

Something in the tone in which Bel said these last words struck Maizie — her wits sharpened by her own experience — and the last little lingering doubt as to the reality of Bel's delight in her engagement was at once removed. A long and confidential chat between the sisters ensued. Some hours later Nat received Jeff's congratulations.

"I don't know how to put the words. The best has happened. To me, a girl — such a one as Maizie or her sister — seems most too good for common men. What are we, anyway? Rough, used to rustling round among hard places and hard people; while they — why, they're as white and pure as angels. So I have grown to feel that before you or me can claim for his own a woman's love, he should have gone through tight times *like* a man, and earned it. I get mad when I hear men talk of women as the boys in the East do, as if all you had to care for to win a wife was piling up dollars for pin-money and housekeeping. Dollars must be made, we know, but money won't make a man. Now, you have gone through your fire. So good luck to your happiness, old boy, and hers."

He shook hands, and then with a sudden half sigh

turned away. Nat laid a hand upon his arm. "And how about yourself?"

Jeff laughed a joyless laugh. "Me? Happiness is not in my way at present."

Nat hesitated. He was not one of those who find it easy to draw confidences from others. Up to this time it had never occurred to him to do such a thing; but late events had quickened his sympathies and opened his eyes to many things, and the dangers Jeff had shared with him, as well as something in the man himself, made Nat feel a sudden desire to know the cause of a depression of spirits which had fallen upon Jeff of late. Yet he had no right to pry into other people's business.

"Jeff," he said after a moment's pause, "I am going to ask a question. It is not a fair one, and you may feel it interfering. If so, dry me up. Has it ever occurred to you — say before the Amenta raid — that happiness might be in your way?"

Jeff nodded but did not speak.

"What has put you off?"

"Mixer."

"Since the raid?"

"Yes."

"What was his argument?"

“Want of money. Mind you, Mixer’s right. He did not put me off the track entirely. But he talked—well, common sense. At least I guess so. But, some way, p’raps because I’m rather beaten down by the little frizzling I got, and the fighting, it seems rather hard. However, I promised. So there is no more to be said, only I’m not going to stay round here long. I could not stand it.”

“What promise did you give?”

“That I would not speak to—to her, nor look her way again, till I had put by a pile—say \$2000 at least. Now that, to me, is a big sum, and will take me years to make. Meanwhile she—Bel—you guess who it is so I may say her name, what will she think? That is what bothers me so bad. If she cares she won’t like it. If she don’t care, well, hadn’t I better know? But, there, why do I talk foolishness? Mixer must be right. I know he is, and I will go away. I believe I’ll go to-night. Could you make excuses for me, Nat?”

But Nat did not hear the question. He had fallen into one of his silent fits, and seemed to have forgotten Jeff. But as the latter, a little hurt, was about to go away, Nat stopped him. “Tell me this—have you ever spoken to Dan?”

Jeff grinned. "Need you ask? Would you, if you had not a cent, care to face that man on such a point? I should be afraid he might have a fit, or give me one. No, I have not spoken to Dan."

"He is her father," observed Nat in a reflective tone. "Mixer is not. Are you afraid of him?"

Jeff drew himself up.

"If that is your idea, I'll go at once. Afraid! Ten Dan Shelfords, each meaner than the one before, would not scare me. I'll speak to him to-night, before I go. Thank you for the hint."

Jeff spoke with some heat, and Nat's eyes twinkled, but he did not let Jeff see it.

"Well," Nat rejoined gravely, "don't let me advise; but if you feel that way I would certainly speak, only not before sundown. And as to your departure—put that off till to-morrow."

After a little further talk this was agreed to, and the friends parted—Jeff to do some work for Mixer, Nat to think over a sudden idea which had occurred to him while Jeff was relating his troubles.

How Jeff got through the rest of the day he never could remember. Carry it off as he might before

Nat, he was, in truth, horribly afraid of Dan Shelford — when it came to the point of asking his consent to the paying of addresses to Bel. Then Zeke would not at all approve. Yet, as Nat had said, Dan was her father, and after all, things could not be worse than they were at present. Anyhow, he had said he would do it, and do it he must. Jeff waited until Dan had supped, and then brusquely invited him to the saloon, and called for sherry cobbler.

Dan Shelford was quite his old dry self. In Mixer's absence he was managing the store, and having made money in various ways out of the Amenta troubles, was as well satisfied with himself and the world in general as it was in his nature to be. His nerves were in excellent condition for driving a hard bargain. It was an ill omen, also, for Jeff, that after taking their drinks at the bar, they retired to the very same place where Nat and Dan had parted so abruptly a few weeks before. Perhaps Dan thought of this parting, — which had so nearly resulted in the loss of his dearest possession, — for his face, as he leant over the balcony and waited for Jeff to open his business, looked hard and drawn.

“You won't care to hear what I have to tell, Mr.

Shelford," began Jeff, hurriedly. "But I reckon to speak, and chance it. I—I had the good fortune a little bit ago to brush up against road agents near Las Animas. It happened that in the coach besides me were—were other folk, and amongst them your daughter, Miss Bel."

Jeff stopped here, and drew a mighty breath. Dan said nothing, and Jeff fancied he was very grim.

"We—we squelched those road agents, and became all of us kind of intimate and friendly."

"So I heard," said Dan, very dryly. Jeff got desperate.

"Afterwards I rode down to Chico Springs, and was at Mixer's. So was Miss Bel,—and then,—well,—I felt *everything* for her—and so I do now—and that's what I wanted to say. She is your daughter, and I felt you ought to know it. Now, what I want to know is, what do you think of it? Will you let me speak to her? Or will you shut right down on me because I'm poor?"

There was a long silence. The murder was out at last, and Jeff, relieved yet distinctly apprehensive, waited to hear his fate. He expected sarcastic, cruel words. He expected questions very pointed and

not too polite, about his present means and future prospects. For a few minutes no reply came at all. Then Dan said slowly :—

“You have not, I presume, spoken of this to Bel?”

“No.”

“That,” Dan went on, “was fair, for she is young. You want my ideas. I’ll give them. First, marriage when there ain’t plenty to fill the pot even in a bad year is nothing less than misery. You are poor, you say. Then you can’t marry—yet. Second, a young girl like Bel, eighteen come next January, don’t know nothing of men. She thinks she does, but she do not. Now, with these points made clear, how do we stand? Kind of far away, I guess. But that ain’t all in this case. For there are circumstances which I may call pecooliar. A man spoke to me of you this afternoon,”—Jeff gave a perceptible start.—“I see you know his name. He did not say much. He ain’t one who does, but I know, by experience, that he *means* more than most. It happens that I owe him something. The only man I do owe a cent to in all this world. I ain’t going to tell you what he said. But I would like to know this: if a man—it might be me—made you an offer of partnership

in stock, would you settle in this country once for all; drive in your stakes to stay, and work year in, year out, steady and straight and true? Would you do all that, Jefferson Collingwood?"

Jeff gasped, and the railing of the balcony on which he leaned shook again. What did this incomprehensible little man mean, with his keen, dry face, and sharp eyes peering up under his hat-brim, and his words of hope and good cheer?

"Is — this — business?" Jeff panted at last.

"That depends on you."

"Then I say yes — *yes* a hundred times. Why, that is all I want. Give me such a start as that, and I would not be poor for long if hard work counts for anything."

"Yet you have not stuck, so far," said Dan; "you have been most everywhere and settled nowhere. Is not that so?"

"You are right," Jeff replied humbly, "quite right. But I never had anything to stay for. Now? But there is one thing yet. If some one — God bless him, whoever he is — be ready to give me a start, how about your daughter? May I — will she — what?"

Dan smiled, a dry, caustic smile, yet if his face could look benevolent I think it must have done so as he said, patting his tall companion gently on the shoulder:—

“That—my good Jefferson—I rather guess you had better find out yourself.”

THE END.

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